GOND RAMAYANI

LAKSHMANA'S FOREST QUEST

A FORGOTTEN EPIC RETOLD BY

PREM PRIYANK

Dedication

To the forests that breathe without speaking,
To the rivers that remember what we forget,
To the night songs sung not on a stage, but around fires that warmed no cities—
This book is for you.
This is dedicated to the Gond people — India’s tribal soul — who carried the Ramayana not in scrolls but in heartbeat and breath. You sang it with drums, carved it on mud walls, passed it down through ancestral rhythm, not pen and ink. You never asked for credit. You only asked that your stories live.
To the Bhagats, the bards who walked barefoot from village to village singing the Gond Ramayani across seven nights — thank you. You are not just storytellers. You are memory-keepers, warriors of voice. Though your names may not appear in epics, your songs have kept the soul of Bharat alive.
To the Lakshmana of this forgotten tale — the one who walks quietly behind a king but becomes a hero among trees — this book is your echo. May your story finally rise, not from palaces, but from roots and red earth.
To my country, my elders, and to every child like me who dreams of telling a story the world forgot — this is not just a book. It is a small lamp I place before a very old shrine.
May the forest hear it.
May Bharat remember.
— Prem Priyank
Student | Author | Child of India

Most people know the story of Lord Rama — the warrior prince, the bridge of stones, the battle in Lanka. But very few know what happened after the Ramayana ended. Even fewer know that in the heart of India’s forests, among the Gond tribals, a different Ramayana was kept alive — not on paper, but in memory, music, and myth.

I am a student, a dreamer, and a proud child of India. As someone who grew up hearing folk tales, I always wondered: what about the stories we never read in textbooks? What about the voices from our villages, our forests, our ancestors?

Then I discovered the Gond Ramayani.

In this version, Lakshmana becomes the hero — not just a shadow of Lord Rama, but a warrior on his own journey. He enters the forests, meets spirit beings, fights shape-shifting demons, and marries a tribal warrior princess. It’s a story of bravery, identity, and the bond between humans and nature. Most of all, it is a story told by a people who never wrote it down — they sang it, danced it, and kept it alive in their hearts.

As a young writer, I knew I had to do something. I wanted to retell this epic — not change it, but bring it into English so that more people, especially children like me, can discover its magic.

This book is not a copy of the Ramayana. It's not even a rewrite. It's a tribute — to the Gond people, their forests, and their beautiful tradition of storytelling. Every chapter is woven from real research, tribal belief, and deep love for Bharat's soul.

May this work be my offering — to my country, to my culture, and to a world that still listens when the forest speaks.

— Prem Priyank

Student | Storyteller | Dreamer

INTRODUCTION – THE GONDS, THEIR FOREST, AND THE FORGOTTEN RAMAYANA

The Gonds are one of India’s oldest and largest tribal communities, living in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and parts of Maharashtra. Long before written history, the Gonds lived close to nature — worshipping rivers, trees, animals, and spirits. They passed on knowledge not through books but through songs, dances, and stories.

One of their most sacred stories is the Gond Ramayani — a version of the Ramayana not found in Valmiki’s Sanskrit epic or Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas. It is their own Ramayana, told in their own way.

Unlike the traditional Ramayana, which ends with Rama’s return to Ayodhya, the Gond Ramayani begins where the other ends. The hero is not Rama — it is Lakshmana, his younger brother. According to Gond belief, Lakshmana’s destiny was not over after Lanka. He had another path to walk — one that led him deep into the forests, to protect the people of the land, and to find a warrior bride among the tribal clans.

The Gond Ramayani is passed down through oral performances called “Pradhan Geet”, sung by wandering bards known as Bhagats. These performances can last 7 to 14 nights and include not just stories, but drumming, dancing, and spirit-invoking rituals. In these tales, the gods are not distant — they are part of the earth, the fire, and the trees.

What makes the Gond Ramayani special is how it blends mythology with real tribal life:

- The forests are alive with spirits.
- Nature is not scenery — it is a character.
- Women are warriors, demons wear local forms, and the divine speaks in bird songs.

But tragically, most people outside the tribal world have never heard of this epic.

That’s why this book matters. It’s not just a translation. It’s an act of preservation, of cultural respect, and of storytelling.

I have written this in English so that more children — across India and the world — can experience a tale that is both ancient and alive.

This introduction is an invitation. Come walk the forest path. Listen to the drums of the Gonds. Watch Lakshmana become more than a brother — watch him become a legend of the tribes.

CHAPTER 1: THE SONG OF INDRAKAMANI

PART 1: THE DREAM OF THE DRUM

BEFORE RAM RULED AYODHYA, BEFORE THE GOLDEN DEER LEAPT, BEFORE THE VANAR ARMY ROARED —
THERE WERE DRUMS IN THE DARK FORESTS, AND SONGS BENEATH THE SAL TREES.

The forest of Sarpakund slept like a serpent, coiled in its quiet. The stars above blinked their one-eyed gaze, and the rivers hummed lullabies that only the trees could understand. In a hut woven from mahua bark and peacock feathers, Lakshmana sat cross-legged. He had not spoken in three days. His bow, once restless like a snake in heat, now lay untouched beside the hearth. Sita was home. Rama had returned. But Lakshmana… he dreamed.

And the dream never ended.

Every time his eyes closed, the same sound returned —

A drumbeat.

Not any drum — but one that echoed with the weight of sky and thunder. It pulsed like a heartbeat from beneath the ground. It came from a land he had never seen.

He asked Sita, “Do you hear it?”

She smiled sadly. “You’re hearing something from before your birth. Something from your path.”

The Arrival of the Musician-Priest

That night, a stranger walked into the forest. A priest without gods, a musician without strings. His name was Tungar, and he wore snakes on his wrists and coal-dust in his hair. He said, “O Lakshmana, the dream you dream is not your own. It is a bride’s call.”

“A bride?” Lakshmana frowned. “Whose bride?”

“Indrakamani,” said Tungar. “Daughter of the sky. She has sent the drumbeats as a svayamvar summons. You are chosen.”

Lakshmana looked away. “I have no need for marriage. My duty is done.”

Tungar laughed — a dry, woodsmoke laugh. “Then why does your heart beat to her drum? Why does the forest murmur her name?”

The Drum of Indrakamani

And so began the tale. Indrakamani, child of Indra, had refused all kings. She did not want garlands or jewels. She would only marry the one who could hear her drum — a sacred dandari carved from the bones of thunderbirds and smeared with the sap of dream trees.

Only one man, in all three worlds, heard it in his sleep.

Lakshmana.

Tungar placed the drum in front of him. “Beat it, and she will come. Refuse, and your dream will never end.”

Forest Whispers

The trees leaned closer. The snakes in Tungar’s hair hissed in anticipation. Even the moon paused its path in the sky.

Lakshmana lifted the stick. His hand trembled.

He struck.

DHUM… DHUM… DHHHUM…

And in a palace far beyond clouds,

Indrakamani awoke.

She smiled.

“It is time.”

POETIC MONOLOGUE – GOND
CHANT STYLE

O drum hidden in earth's
belly, flourish beneath my
chest
You are not instrument—but
spirit’s echo beneath bone
O Lakshmana of silent vow,
you do not hear music—you
recall memory
Indrakamani does not wait in
palace—her call trembles
through your sleep
This is no marriage of
garlands—this is a vow
woven in thunder
Your fingers awaken not
sound—but the forest that
waits
You are not prince—but
pulse of root and leaf
Your path is not exile—but
the summons of a bride born
of storm
Let Rama bind his bow. Let
Sita tend fire. Let the king
rest in peace.
You, son of the silent forest,
hear the call winds cannot
carry

For drums do not ask—
drums demand
 **They demand heart—
demand sacrifice—demand
response
So beat, Lakshmana, on the
threshold of sky and land
And awaken the bride made
of lightning—who waits in
your bone-smoke dream
What sound is this, ringing in
your rib-cages?
It is not departure. It is not
return.
It is ram’s step into the
drum’s body.
O forest, tremble—your
prince awakens.
O sky, bend—your daughter
descends.
Let the drums of promise
echo—once, twice, thrice
For the dream has begun.

Lakshmana awoke at dawn to the sound of feathers brushing earth. The drum’s echo had faded, leaving a humming in his veins.
Outside, the world felt changed—as though something unseen approached.
He stepped into the courtyard. Dew clung to red sal petals, and the forest breathed wide.
Then he saw her: a woman clad in cloud-white robes, her hair braided with lotus stems, her eyes glowing like moonlight on water. She stood at the threshold of his hut.
Indrakamani.
She made no curtsy. She wielded no sword. She offered no jewels. Instead, she extended her hand—and beside it, a handful of golden seeds, fragile as memory and bright with rain.
The villagers froze. Even the peacocks silenced their cries.
Tungar appeared, bowing deep. “She is here,” he whispered.
Lakshmana’s breath halted. He had heard the drum, but had never imagined the source.
“Why call me?” he asked.
“Because no king hears this drum,” she replied. “Only the man who remembers his vow.”

The First Trial: Hall of Storm Stone:
She led him into the forest—through sal groves and hidden springs—to an open clearing at the forest's edge. At its center stood a monolithic stone, carved with vines, serpents, and storm sigils. In its base lay a shallow pit filled with coal-black ash.
"Now begins the trial of thunder," Indrakamani said. "You must speak the vow of the forest."
Lakshmana crouched. The carvings glowed gold in moonlight. The ash hissed. The wind shivered past.
"Say it," she commanded.
"I vow," he began, "to be not bow—but bridge. Not exile—but echo. To carry the forest's breath under my ribs."
As he spoke, lightning cracked across the sky overhead. Rain flowed as threads from the storm. The ash glowed—and lotus petals drifted into the skydark.
"Now walk through," she whispered.
He stepped into the ash, barefoot. The heat did not burn—but memory did. His bones felt ancient. Each step unrolled stories of forest mothers, tribal songs, lost children—every unspoken memory burned in the ash around him.
When he emerged, the carvings blazed white. Indrakamani stood waiting. The rain had stopped. The wind whispered.
"You passed," she said quietly. "You have heard—not just the drum—but the vow."

Symbols and Cultural Context

In Gond tradition, trials often involve elements of forest, ash, and storm, symbolizing purification, sacrifice, and memory. The carved vines and serpents reflect ancestral ties to Nagadevta (serpent deities) and earth spirits. Walking barefoot through cooled ash represents facing collective sorrow and rebirth.

The vow he speaks—about being bridge not bow, echo not exile—is adapted from Gond oral notions of duty: to hold memory, to resist erasure, to serve forest as kin. This inversion—from royal heroism to forest responsibility—is central in Gond Ramayani storytelling.

Emerging Union

The forest resumed its breath. Indrakamani approached Lakshmana. She placed one golden seed on his chest.

“Plant this in silence,” she said.

“It will grow where rule meets root.”

Lakshmana bowed. In that moment, the air shimmered, and the forest leaf-roots curled like fingers of blessing.

He realized their union had not been about kingdoms or crowns—but about memory, song, sacred soil, and regrowth.

Lakshmana’s heart echoed with the sound of rain-washed leaves when Indrakamani led him deeper into the forest. The air tasted of earth and ozone, as if nature itself had held its breath for this moment.

At a clearing surrounded by ancient tamarind trees, they found a circle of black stone—its surface carved with lightning bolts, roaring clouds, and spirals of flame. In its center lay a pyre of dried mahua sticks arranged in a perfect spiral.

“This is the Trial of Lightning,” Indrakamani said softly. “You swore to carry the forest’s breath. Now prove it.”

Lakshmana stood barefoot upon the stone circle. Indrakamani ignited the pyre with a single spark—no wind, no fanning, just the hush of anticipation. Flames leapt upward—not wild, but disciplined, glowing white and scarlet.

“Step inside. Speak your vow again.”

Lakshmana drew breath:

“I vow to carry the memory of every root, every lost name, every untold history. I will walk under shadow and fire, but I will not yield.”

When his foot entered the spiral, fire roared. Yet he felt no burn. Instead, the flames moved around him, bending like dancers around a silent drum. Stories unfurled around him:

- A grandmother buried without funeral.
- A village burned under official decree.

- Children taken from mothers in the name of "development."
- A tribal scripture erased from schoolbooks.

These were not visions of guilt—they were layers of grief and song, woven into the flame. Lakshmana closed his eyes, held the vow in his chest, and let it ignite the forest's memory.
The flames subsided. The pyre turned to ash; the stones glowed faintly. Indrakamani lowered her forehead to his.
"You have melted not wood, but sorrow. The forest knows."
She took his hand, and together they walked from the circle. The sky broke open with thunder, the rain forgiving.
"The vow is sealed," she whispered.

Cultural & Symbolic Notes

- The Trial of Fire rooted in Gond inversion of the Agni-Pariksha: Lakshmana, not Sita, must prove integrity—and not for exile, but for memory.
- The spiral fire motif evokes Gond ritual circles used in festivals like Chaita and Nirjala Ekadashi, symbolizing rebirth, continuity, and pain transformed into ritual power.
- Ash and flame are key Gond symbols for purification, grief, ancestral memory, and resistance to erasure.

O flame made of root and rage, bend.
Let mortal flesh become drumskin under your roar.
You are not fire. You are recall.
The forgotten names buried in embers—smoke becomes their trumpet.
O Lakshmana of quiet breath, step into sorrow's circle.
Not to survive fire—but to unmake it with vow.
You do not pass trial—you become threshold.
Not bow—but bridge. Not exile—but echo.
The pyre does not burn you.
You burn loss into ash.
You turn grief into memory.
This is not a rite of purity.
It is a war against forgetting.

You bear not jewels. You bear seeds.
Inside you—forest mothers, lost children, silenced tongues.
The flame bows to your vow.
The circle opens. The smoke yields.
Now the forest knows: you are not prince.
You are pulse in the drum.
You are thunder walking on two feet.
Let the lightning that called you now sleep in your blood.
Let the pyre's ash stir root beneath your heel.
O Lakshmana, hear—
The bride of storm waits.
Not in palace, not in crown,
But in vow carried through flame.

Lakshmana and Indrakamani walked in silence through the damp forest, the earth beneath their feet glowing faintly from the fire recently burned. Ferns folded like hands over the trail as if in reverence. Above, the moon cast a pale path through the sal canopy.

At the heart of an ancient clearing stood a stone altar, carved with serpents, lightning bolts, and crescent moons. Tall grasses circled the platform, swaying as though breathing. On its face was inscribed a single verse:

"Where thunder meets seed, memory returns."

Indrakamani approached the altar, opened her palm, and revealed a golden seed, small and glowing with inner light—soft as dust, heavy with promise.

“Place this on the altar, Lakshmana,” she said softly.

He took the seed and kissed its surface. The forest exhaled.

Ceremony of the Seed

She knelt beside him:

“This is the Seed of Memory.

It bears the sorrow of burned villages, lost children, erased scriptures.

If you plant it, you must carry these roots.

If you do not, there is no union.”

He lifted Sita’s cloth knee sash and kissed Indrakamani’s feet. The moment his lips touched her sandals, a drift of petals—red,

white, golden—floated through the clearing. He placed the seed on the stone carved with spirals. Then:
“I vow to plant not only this seed—but all that it bears. I vow the forest’s memory will emerge in song, in roots, in every heart that hears it.”
The ground trembled. Lightning cracked across the sky. Rain fell—gentle, cleansing. Indrakamani placed her hand over Lakshmana’s. The petals settled into lines, forming symbols in the earth: a flame, a drum, a spiral of root, a fallen leaf.

The Hidden Root Bond

He understood then: their union wasn’t about kingdoms. It was about memory, survival, and rebirth. The seed was not an object, but a living symbol.
She stood and embraced him. The grasses bowed. From their union sprang a soft golden light.
“Now our bond is sealed,” she murmured, “not in vows alone, but in root and rhythm.”
The people of the forest stirred. From huts hidden beyond the clearing, shadows of Gond elders appeared. Women, young and old, holding roots, drums, and sacred cloth. They began to sing—laments turned to chants—celebrating not royalty, but renewal. They sang of forests burned, books banned, drums broken, seeds stolen—and now—seeds returned.

In the flickering firelight, Lakshmana and Indrakamani stood—marked not by jewels, but by the seed's glow planted in the stone beneath their feet.

Cultural Significance & Symbolism

- The seed symbolizes ancestral memory and forest resilience—analogous to Gond rituals where seed preservation symbolizes resistance to cultural erasure.
- The altar and verse reflect the idea of threshold between heaven (thunder) and earth (seed), echoing Gond concepts of union between sky deities and nature spirits.
- The ceremony of petals forming symbols mirrors Gond festival practices where patterns are drawn with petals, rice flour, or ash to mark ritual boundaries or spiritual union.
- The participation of elders with roots and drums signifies community involvement in individual vows, central to Gond collective narratives where heroes emerge not alone but through shared memory.

O seed of golden sorrow,
planted in stone and storm—
Let your root coil in
Lakshmana’s heart like river
in root.
You are not grain—you are
memory made flesh.
You bear the grief of burned
forest, erased language,
broken drum.
O Lakshmana with drum-
scar under rib—
Plant this seed, do not bury
it.
Grow its sorrow into song.
This union is not of crown or
cloth—
It is vow, seal, wound, and
root entwined.
The world above may bow in
quake and thunder—
But the world beneath grows
in rhythms of memory.
Let the petal-serpent trace its
shape in dust—
Let the earth recall what
empires erased.

Your union is not love. It is
resistance.
It is naming lost children. It
is singing burned villages.
It is planting the memory
they tried to uproot.
O forest, witness. O sky,
bless.
Let root and thunder meet at
this altar of vow.
Where seed meets storm,
memory returns.
You are not exile. You are
echo. You are bridge.
And from this union, the
forest will rise again.

Lakshmana awoke one morning to a forest drowned in silence. The mahua blooms had fallen; birds no longer sang at dusk. The golden seed they planted lay dormant beneath the altar, cold and heavy in the stone.

Indrakamani stood beside him, her face pale under the gray sky.

“The seed sleeps,” she said quietly. “You hear nothing.”

Lakshmana answered nothing. The drum that once thrummed in his chest had gone still. He feared the vow had failed.

The Long Silence

Days passed as seasons turned. The forest thickened in cold. Lakshmana found it difficult even to breathe. Indrakamani retreated within herself, humming low notes no one could follow.

Tungar remained at a distance. The villagers spoke of “winter grief,” a test deeper than fire. They told Lakshmana:

“First the sound, then the flame, then the silence—and only those who walk through it return with rhythm.”

Their words felt empty.

He began walking alone—tracing the riverbeds, listening to stones, pressing his ear against termite hills. He asked himself:

“Is the vow my pride—and not my purpose? Did I bind myself to the forest, or to my own memory?”

The Whisper Trail

Then one night, he heard faint singing. Not drums. Not chanting—but hushed voices weaving melody from dry leaves.

He followed the trail: through salt plasm, past the river he revived, beneath a banyan heavy with mist.

Under that tree lay Indrakamani, eyes closed, humming—the Song of Breezes, a Gond lullaby whispered only at winter's hush.

Her voice stirred root and petal, coaxing the seed to dream. Lakshmana realized: her music was the spark.

He knelt beside her, touched the seed's spot—a tiny sprout, grey and fragile.

"Your voice is thunder in sleep," he whispered.

She opened her eyes. Soft with dawn—

"The forest believes. The seed heard me," she said.

"But only your silence made it listen."

Union in Quiet

In that cold hush, they pressed their foreheads together. No vows. No drumbeats.

Just breath.

Just root.

The seed's sprout unfurled two tiny leaves in moonlight.

Lakshmana placed his hand over the shoot, Indrakamani hers. For the first time that winter, Lakshmana felt warmth again—music not in drum or fire, but in silence walked.

Cultural & Symbolic Notes

- Gond rituals often include a ritual silence or ‘winter khoya’—a period where no singing occurs, letting the forest and music rest.
- The banyan tree is central in Gond cosmology as memory tree—roots that hold histories, voices, and ancestral whispers.
- The whisper lullaby reference uses actual Gond lullabies that parents sing in hushed tones during the marai (cold phase) to keep ancestral memory alive even in hardship.
- The sprouted seed underlines the Gond belief that resistance grows in winter, in quiet, unseen — not only in loud rites.

O winter’s hush, be not
farewell—but deep root.
Let the drum retreat, that
seed may learn to wait.
Silence is not absence—it is
breath held beneath snow.
It is root’s lullaby buried
under frost.
The forest does not forget in
noise—but remembers in
hush.
It wakes again in the whisper
of sprouting seed.
O Lakshmana, the drum
stilled—but your soil
listened.
O Indrakamani, your song
slept—but the root dreamed.
There is no fear in waiting.
There is victory in trust.
Not all truth bleeds fire—
some blooms in quiet.
Your vow did not falter, son
of root.
It tested itself in winter’s
silence.

Now lean your ear to vine
and stone.
Listen: the sprout’s breath is
your new rhythm.
Let petals sleep beneath
frost.
Let your heart pulse in hush.
For indifference fades, but
memory grows.
Not in drumbeats alone—but
in patient root.
Let thunder sleep, let flame
rest.
The forest waits. You have
arisen.
When spring returns, you
will not walk alone.
The seed will follow. The
root will sing.
And the vow will grow louder
than any drum.

Lakshmana and Indrakamani returned to the ancestral elders' grove at dawn. The forest lay silent except for the drumming of cicadas. The golden seed they planted had become a shoot, fragile but glimmering.
They carried saplings of seven sacred trees—mahua, tamarind, sal, banyan, mahua rashik, wood apple, and khejri—each tied with a single red thread and a small drum string. Every tree represented one vow, one lineage, and one story from Lakshmana's journey. Gathered around them were seven Gond elders—each chosen not by birth, but by memory carried in bone and breath. A drumming priest struck a quiet rhythm. Families stood in a circle around the saplings and the couple.

Ritual of the Seven Vows
At the center, Tungar spoke:
"These trees represent our forest's breath. Each one holds one vow of Lakshmana's journey. Plant them to root memory in land."
Lakshmana stepped forward, touching the mahua sapling. He declared:
"I vow that justice will bloom in burnt villages, and drums will sound where existence was erased."
Elders scattered petals. Indrakamani touched the sal seedling:
"Here I vow to guard forest women's tongues, protect ancestral lullabies, and plant songs where they were forbidden."

One by one, each sacred tree received a vow:

1. Mahua – memory of names erased.
2. Tamarind – bitter justice for uprooted lives.
3. Sal – sound of ancestral words.
4. Banyan – roots of shelter in exile.
5. Mahua rashik – fire of resistance.
6. Wood apple – sweetness in sorrow.
7. Khejri – endurance in drought and diaspora.

With each vow, the elders drummed—a slow beat rising into thunderous cadence, joined by women shaking leaf rattles, children striking small drums.

Community Bond

When the final vow was spoken, Lakshmana and Indrakamani dug shallow holes beneath each sapling and planted them together. The elders added droplets of river water, blood from his finger cut, and a red seed filled by her palm.

The forest seemed to inhale. When the saplings stood firm, Tungar raised his drum to the sky and struck:

Dum—dum—dum…

Peacocks cried in answered rhythm. The saplings trembled as though alive.

Every Gond family wove their own vow—some wrapped in cotton, some sung in lullaby, some chanted in silence.

From that morning onward, the Gond forest became a living archive. The saplings were not just plants—they were nodes of memory and

resistance, growing in soil as the narrative roots grew in hearts.

Symbolism & Cultural Context

- Planting seven trees reflects Gond sacred numerology and cosmic rhythm; the number seven appears in festivals, clan lineage, and recurring folk motifs.
- Each tree represents memory, endurance, and forms of resistance—key Gond cultural values.
- The communal vows reflect Gond collectivism: individual heroism is marked by community bonding, memory preservation, and ritual affirmation.
- Using elements like mahua, bark, seed, and blood connects ritual acts to lived ecology: people, forest, soil, and story interwoven—a Gond worldview.

O forest of promise, seven
roots rise.
Not seed alone—but vow
cradled in sacred leaf.
You are not seven trees—you
are seven songs.
Each root hums a story, each
leaf sings a promise.
O Lakshmana with
drum-scar and seed-heart,
you offered not bark—but
breath.
O Indrakamani, spirit of
storm and soil, you pledged
not blood—but song.
Together you planted
memory, not for throne—but
for land.
Not for empire—but for the
silent names.
Mahua breathes the children
lost. Tamarind bleeds the
grief of burnt villages.
Sal mouths the lost lullabies.
Banyan becomes mother to
exile.
Mahua rashik glows with
rebellion. Wood apple tastes
the sweetness of return.
Khejri stands when drought
and diaspora roar.
Let every family vow
become forest root.
Let each sapling become
echo of memory through
wind-grain.

The community drummed.
The future trembled.
The forest bowed as
covenant took bloom.
You are no longer exile.
You are rhythm planted in
earth.
Let empire uproot kingdoms.
Let forgetting march.
But these vows—these trees
—stand witness.
What is planted cannot be
unplanted.
What is vowed cannot be
erased.
When drought comes: the
root will sing.
When silence falls: leaf will
recall voice.
O forest, grow seven songs.
Grow memory into grove.
Because from this union—
storm and seed—
The forest is resurrected.

Lakshmana and Indrakamani stood at the forest’s edge at dawn, the saplings planted behind them, the forest humming in triumph. From here lay Ayodhya—the city of gold—but the saplings were not just rooted in soil; they had rooted in purpose.

They walked through forest corridors and dusty plains until the outlines of the city appeared—temple spires, palace walls, and carts bearing proclamations.

They arrived during the festival of lights, right at the royal square, where Rama had decreed a grand celebration to honor his return. The plaza blazed with firelight. Musicians played, priests chanted. Citizens draped in silk pressed forward with offerings.

But Lakshmana and Indrakamani advanced, barefoot, into the center. In one hand she held a sprig of mahua flower; in the other he carried a small pot of the seven forest flowers, each taken from their saplings.

The court fell silent. Rama stood, regal. Sita glided forward, gold and calm. The crowd hushed—uncertain. A breeze swirled petals from the pot into the air, trailing toward the palace.

Tungar stepped beside them and began:

“O mighty king, behold what has returned not on horse, but in root. Not in conquest, but in covenant.”

The pot’s petals formed shapes in the dusty air: calamus root, seed spiral, flame spiral. The elders present gasped.
Lakshmana spoke:
“Your reign is golden—but the forest remembers the burned villages. Indrakamani’s vows are vow of song, not sorrow.”
He raised the pot high. Petals fell across the royal steps.
Indrakamani followed:
“These seven flowers bear seven pledges. Let them stand as living law. We ask not for throne—but for permission to guard forest mouths and memory songs.”
The crowd stirred. Priests whispered among themselves. The court advisors looked uncertain.
Rama inclined his head.

“Brother—and sister—Ayodhya welcomes not kingdoms, but guardians. Your vows are accepted.”
He turned to Sita, who smiled.
“Let these saplings stand at the forest borders. Let them remind us that rulership is not kingdom—but stewardship.”
Lakshmana and Indrakamani bowed deeply.
As they departed, the guard at the city gate knelt as petals drifted into their hair. A temple priest whispered:
“May you walk long, and the forest long with you.”

Symbolism & Cultural Notes

- Their barefoot return signifies humility and connection to forest earth.
- Offering forest flowers in palace symbolizes nature claiming space in formal power structures.
- Royal recognition as guardians, not as rulers, echoes Gond concept of forest as sovereign, not human monarchy.
- The acceptance of seven flowers indicates bridging tribal values with state authority—recognizing memory and forest laws beyond empire.

POETIC MONOLOGUE — END
OF CHAPTER 1

O Ayodhya of gold, bow to
forest's root.
Let petals fall on your steps
as silent drumbeat of
promise.
Not glory we seek, but
guardianship.
Not throne—but covenant.
We return as heirs of root,
not crown.
We walk barefoot where soil
speaks our vows.
Flowers fall as law.
Petals become syllables in
the forest's code.
You rule a golden palace—
earth crumbles beyond your
wall.
But seven flowers carry
seven truths.
Rama, you command armies.
We guard memory.
The kingdom may shine—
for a season.
But the saplings whisper
through centuries.

Let the court accept petals in
place of coins.
Let memory serve as your
laws.
We are not exile returned.
We are forest-born from
drum and seed.
When leaf falls, remember
this day.
When serenity fades, recall
our vow.
We carry no swords.
Only vows carved in flora
and root.
Let empire rise
And time forget.
But let these pledges
Grow in soil and song.
O
Ayodhya_of_golden_crown,
remember:
True sovereignty sleeps in
forest breath.
And where root meets song,
memory endures.

CHAPTER 2

PART 1: VOYAGE TO RAKSHASA'S DAUGHTER (RANI PUFAYA)

PART 1 — VOYAGE TO RANI PUFAYA, DAUGHTER OF THE RAKSHASA KING

In the heart of the forest’s east stood a river wider than allegiance—black as moonless night, wound with mist and ancient stories. It was said the river was once the immense eye of Ravana, carved into stone to guard his daughter, Rani Pufaya, orphaned of mortal fatherhood and raised by forest spirits as queen.

Walking at dawn, Lakshmana and Indrakamani approached its banks. The air tasted of wet silk and distant drums. Indrakamani paused, slid her fingers across the water—felt heartbeat in its ripple.

“This river,” she said, “carries Rakshasa blood and forest grief. To cross it is to pledge silence with wrath.”

Tungar knelt and tossed seven golden seeds into the current. They sank one by one, seeds of memory, of martyr towns, of nameless mothers.

A reed boat emerged. No helmsman. No sail. Just a carving of a coiled snake on its prow. The vessel drifted to their feet.

Lakshmana looked to Indrakamani. She placed her palm over his heart and nodded.

They boarded.

Across the Shadow Waters

The river was silent. No current. No birds. Only the boat’s quiet creak and breath of wood.

On the opposite shore, fire-light flickered. A palace carved from black granite—its towers rising like tipped fists toward the moon. Smoke carried the scent of burnt neem and jasmine.

As they landed, shadows coiled among pillars. From the darkness stepped Rani Pufaya—her eyes bright embers. She wore iron bracelets shaped like cobra heads, a crown of crescent wood, and held a forest drum painted with her father’s snake motif.

She studied them in silence, her drum echoing pulse into the stone floor.

The Trial of the Forest Drum

Pufaya spoke at last:

“You bring seeds to water. I drum to awaken ashes. Show me vow—not sword.”

She lifted the drum and struck one beat. The echo stayed. A second. A third. Then silence.

Lakshmana sat cross-legged and struck the drum Tungar had carried—seven beats. In answer, the palace trembled—a whisper of thunder.

“Your rhythm is borrowed,” said Pufaya. “Mine is heir-loud. Play mine.”

He struck her drum once—uncertain. It sounded broken. A crack of shame and silence.

The note ended in echo of loss.

“Try again,” she said.

He played again—this time sheithing tension.

The drum spoke of ransom, exile, rivers, and missing mothers.
She listened. Her iron bracelets clicked softly. When his last beat had faded, she nodded and deigned:
“You do not conquer. You remember.”
Pufaya’s Offer and Warning
Pufaya led them through catacomb corridors to a throne carved from serpent scales. She let Lakshmana sit. She sat across.
“Your vow is forged in smoke. I shall join you—not bride—but drum-spirit of justice.”
“But know this,” she warned. “Forging alliance with a forest vow means crossing frontiers: forest law vs palace law, river blood vs empire’s code.”
She handed him a snake-scale drumstick and placed a circle-patterned belt of peacock-feathers around his waist.
“If you break that vow, the serpent will slither behind your back all days. If you keep it, the venom turns into incense.”
Together, they drummed. Not for triumph. For headlines. For buried names.

O river of Rakshasa grief,
you coil beneath bark and stone.
Here arrives not empire, but
echo—bearing seed vow.
Rani of snake and ash,
drum-queen of broken halls,
You did not offer marriage—
you gave legacy.
Seven beats from Lakshmana
awaken your palace's sleep.
You strike the first note not
for bride—but for justice's
pact.
He carries snake-drum and
feather-belt—not to own—
but to remember.
You join not in chain, but in
binding rhythm.
Your throne carved of
serpent-scale is memory's
altar.
Not conquest—but covenant.
Betray not the vow, son of
forest and fire.
Let your drum speak for the
missing children of your
world.

O Pufaya, queen whose
father sleeps in stone,
Your daughter's vow is fire
under Lakshmana's heart.
Together you move through
river eyes, through palace
stones,
Binding forest law and
Rakshasa oath.
Let your drums echo across
fields, across ashes of burnt
trees,
Named for no king—but for
memory.
We mark this alliance not
with garlands, but with
drumbeats.
Not with letters, but with
root rhythm.
O river, carry this pact to
distant forests.
O palace, tremble in
recognition.
Heir to lotus-feather vow,
drum-guardian of ash-names
Rise not as prince—but as
echo.
Rise not to rule—but to
remember.

PART 2 — THE BLOOD-ROOT PATH AND THE THREE SISTERS OF SHADOW

The night after Rani Pufaya joined Lakshmana’s journey, the forest deepened. Trees no longer whispered—they growled. Bark peeled in silence. Roots twisted like wounded limbs across the ground. This was no longer the domain of animals, but of memory turned to warning.

Pufaya called this terrain the Blood-Root Path—the boundary between the law of living forests and the will of the older, vengeful woods that had seen kingdoms fall and queens buried with open eyes.

Three hills rose in the distance, shaped like crouched women. Pufaya nodded toward them. "Each hill is a sister. And each sister holds a part of my broken lineage," she said. “To pass, we must face them—not with sword or voice—but through remembrance.”

Tungar looked around. No birds. No leaves moved. Only shadow.

Lakshmana stepped forward.

“Tell me their names.”

Pufaya replied:

“First is Maukari, the Silent One.

Second is Khosnari, the Liar’s Mirror.

Third is Bhinari, the One-Who-Waits.”

“They were guardians of my mother’s dowry chest, and protectors of the truth my father swore never to reveal. But when Ravana perished, they became shadows—devoted to testing any who bear his daughter’s vow.”
She pressed her drum to the earth. The sound died inside the soil.
“They hear.”

The First Sister: Maukari, the Silent One
They approached the first hill. It breathed. Vines swayed, and from a crevice emerged a figure cloaked in stillness. She had no eyes, no tongue—just ears and ribs that hummed like forest wind.
“She listens to what you do not say,” Pufaya whispered.
Lakshmana dropped to his knees and removed his belt of feathers, placing it at Maukari’s feet.
“I bring no crown. Only memory,” he said.
Maukari reached out and touched his cheek. A tremor passed through his body—a memory of his brother Ram standing alone on the banks of exile, weeping not for a kingdom lost, but for a forest untouched.
Maukari retreated. The path cleared.

The Second Sister: Khosnari, the Liar’s Mirror
The second hill shimmered like glass. At its center was a pool, clear and unmoving. Pufaya knelt and whispered: “She reflects not your truth, but the truth you fear.”
Lakshmana looked into the pool.
He did not see his face.
He saw Ayodhya burning.
He saw Sita screaming behind palace walls.
He saw himself sitting on a throne made of iron, not justice.
Tungar gasped. Pufaya whispered: “Khosnari does not judge. She remembers what you try to forget.”
Lakshmana leaned closer and placed the snake-scale drumstick into the pool.
“I carry the burden, not the denial,” he said.
The reflection twisted, then vanished. The water receded. The path opened.
The Third Sister: Bhinari, the One-Who-Waits
The last hill was still. But the wind grew louder.
“She is the one who tests not your past, but your future,” Pufaya warned.
Bhinari rose—a figure veiled in firefly light, face hidden. She carried a dead sapling.
“You speak of building a new forest,” she said. “But can you raise life from ash?”

She gave Lakshmana the sapling.
“Plant it. But use no tools, no spells. Only your memory and guilt.”
He dug into the dirt with bare hands. Blood seeped. He poured a drop of his own tears into the roots.
The sapling rose—one inch.
Pufaya struck her drum once.
The sapling grew two inches.
Tungar placed his ancestor’s bone beside it.
It grew a third.
Bhinari stepped back.
“You are not yet worthy. But you are trying.”
She vanished.

The Vow Renewed

At the end of the Blood-Root Path, Pufaya and Lakshmana stood on the edge of the great red plain known as Chandi-Ghati.
Behind them, the forest moaned like a sleeping god.
Ahead of them, the air burned with stories waiting to be born.
Tungar turned to them both.
“From here, there is no return. Are we still vow-bound?”
Lakshmana looked to Pufaya.
“I walked this far to find justice. But now I carry more than justice—I carry the names I forgot.”
Pufaya raised her drum again. “Then let the drums remember you better than kings ever could.”

The roots grow not from earth,
 But from sorrow buried beneath time.
 We walk not for war,
 But for the names that were stolen in silence.
Maukari listens.
 Not to your voice—but to the cracks between it.
 She measures worth by the tears you do not show.
Khosnari reflects.
 Not your image—but your evasion.
 She burns the mask you wear,
 And shows you the kingdom you fear to inherit.
Bhinari waits.
 She is not judge, but threshold.
 She gives you a seed,
 And asks if your hands can still plant through grief.

O son of Ayodhya,
 You wear no crown here—only scars.
 The drum beats not for empire,
 But for the forgotten daughter of exile.
Walk now, Lakshmana—not as prince,
 But as seedbearer of ashes.
 Let your steps fall like old poems on new soil.
This forest remembers more than scriptures.
 It sings not of gods,
 But of oaths whispered in firelight
 By women who were never named.
Let your next vow not be forged in gold,
 But in the rhythm of three sisters:
 Silent, shattering, waiting.
May your path bleed truth,
 And your memory hold more than power.
May the forest forgive you,
 But never let you forget.

CHAPTER 2, PART 3 — CROSSING CHANDI-GHATI, THE BLOOD-SALT BATTLEFIELD

The forest thinned into a wide plain, its earth red as iron cliffs and dotted with white salt patches that glistened under a pale sky. This was Chandi-Ghati, the ancient battlefield where Gond heroes perished and their blood seeped into the ground, turning it into land haunted by hunger and grief.

As Lakshmana and Pufaya entered this place, the wind carried ash, and the ground seemed to whisper unresolved chants.

Pufaya murmured, “This plain swallows drumbeats and spits only echoes. No vow made here holds unless it stands better than blood.”

They walked barefoot. The cracked salt crunched under their feet. Beneath it lay bones—not just of warriors, but mothers, children, entire lineages erased by empire’s march.

The Buried Drum

Ahead lay the Buried Drum—half surrounded by salt, its shell broken, strings snapped, painted with fading symbols of tribal kings. Elders told that after a massacre centuries ago, survivors buried the drum to blind the oppressor’s ear, hoping memory might sprout again someday.

Pufaya knelt, brushing salt from its hollow.

“Hear its silence,” she said.
“But do not pity it—let it demand resurrection.”
Lakshmana knelt too and placed one drumstick into the broken shell. Nothing. Then he whispered vows—vows he had pledged by forest, flame, seed, root. Others whispered them too: Indrakamani, Tungar, the Gond elders who followed.
The shell trembled. A single chord echoed—soft as a mother’s heartbeat. Then silence again.

The Cursed Test
Pufaya spoke:
“To restore the drum, you must give what it asks. Not sacrifice life—but reclaim life.”
She handed him a cloth bag: inside lay seven grains of red millet, each dyed with tears of relatives who never saw home.
He and Pufaya walked the plain together, scattering grain along the horizon. With each seed dropped, a gust uncovered a buried bone or rusted blade—names scratched into its surface.
They gathered fragments of memory—not to build tombs, but to return stories to land.

Rising Drum

As night fell, clouds gathered over Chandi-Ghati. Lakshmana returned to the drum shell, now set upright in salt-dust. He sprinkled the last grain over the strings.

Then he struck it once—loud, clear, trembling with echoes of grief and hope.

Every blade of grass, every salt-white patch, twitched. A song rose—not from voice, but ground. It was the drum speaking: not through return, but through root.

Memory lifted from soil. A gust carried the song across fields.

Indrakamani joined on her drum. Stones along horizon glimmered—votive fires lit by wind, as though the dead answered with flame.

Finally Ascending

They stood side by side, drumbeats fading, wind raking through grass. Indrakamani raised her palm, and Lakshmana placed his veneration in her hand.

“The promise lives,” she said.

“The heroes are not buried—they rise in song.”

Behind them, Pufaya stepped close and placed her drum beside theirs.

“We leave not with shame,” she said.

“But with the vow of ritual restored.”

Cultural & Symbolic Elements

- Chandi-Ghati reflects Gond sacred geography: battlefields where ancestral wounds refuse to heal become sacred archives.
- The Buried Drum stands for obliterated culture; restoring it is symbolic of reclaiming erased histories.
- Scattering sacred millet dyed red with tears embodies mourning seeds planted for rebirth.
- The act of drum-restoration echoes Gond ritual reclamation—using ancestral instruments as living history, not relics.

POETIC MONOLOGUE

Chandi-Ghati bleeds not merely blood—but
memory buried in salt.
Each grain tossed is not grain—but vow —
whispered into demons' soil.
The drum lay broken—not by edge of sword—
but by weight of forgetting.
Its first strike is not music—but return of voice.
We did not dig for bones—to entomb lament.
We sowed millet—tainted by sorrow, singing
names into earth.
Salt does not kill memory.
It surfaces it.
Lakshmana knows no kingdom anymore.
He knows root. He knows vow. He knows drum-
breath of return.
Pufaya, warrior-queen, did not show mercy.
She showed debt— and memory's tether.
A grain dropped is a name remembered.
A chord struck is history resurrected.
Let empires erect stones.
We plant drumbeats in land.
As the cleared earth listened,
The drum spoke not of victory—but survival.
We bury no more.
We resurrect.
O forest of fallen heroes—listen.
Your names walk again in rhythm.
Chandi-Ghati, cursed plain,
Let your salt taste freedom.
We lit memory—not with flame—but with drum
in bloodstone earth.
And it rose.

Lakshmana, Indrakamani, and Rani Pufaya moved through the night-shrouded forest toward a clearing thick with embers. It was said the ground still glowed where old law courts once stood—ruled by forest kings and fire priests. Now the Court of Ember awaited them, a place of ritual judgment and covenant binding, where vows were spoken to flame and sealed with root.

At the center lay an altar carved from basalt—its surface etched with tribal glyphs, serpents, and spirals of flame. Seven embers glowed in small pits before it, each symbolizing trials passed: fire, seed, silence, root, drum, sisterhood, and vow.

Pufaya stepped forward and placed her iron-cobra drum beside the embers. Then she raised her voice:

“Let our pact be spoken not for kingdoms, but for forest breath. Let our vow stand between memory and forgetting. Let the Court of Ember witness.”

She handed Lakshmana a thorn of mahua root, blackened at the tip. He placed it in the first ember. The glow flared, then softened. Indrakamani kneeled and pressed her palm—marking glyphs of wind and water—into the second ember. Tendrils of smoke drifted upward in curving patterns.

Other Gond elders followed. Tungar placed a shaft of thunderbird bone in ember three. Children scattered petals between embers four and five. Women tied red threads to branches above.

Finally, Pufaya’s iron drum was raised and offered before the seventh ember. Lakshmana took Rani’s cobra-scale stick in his left hand, and the snake drumstick in his right.

“With these,” he declared solemnly, “I vow across worlds: I will carry roots through exile, drum through silence, memory in song, justice in rhythm. I will guard seed, thunder, root, vow, grief, justice, and alliance.”

He struck Pufaya’s drum. The sound fractured then merged—a resonance that rose through the embers and into the night sky. Flames flickered, embers glowed brighter, and acrid bark smoke drifted off the court’s boundary.

They bowed.

The forest exhaled.

Above, unseen birds began their pre-dawn calls.

Return through the Underworld

On the return journey, Lakshmana walked ahead carrying Pufaya’s drum beneath his arm, its cobra-head carving pressed to his chest.
Indrakamani followed, nourishing the golden seed sprout that now had four leaves.
They crossed hidden river weirs and root-bridges, met silent caves where past vow-makers slept with their seeds.
In one cave, Lakshmana paused before scribbled petroglyphs: his own story unfolding in ancient script—seven forest trials chronicled in stone. It reminded him: his journey was ancient, not new.

Reunion at the Sapling Grove

Arriving at the grove where the seven saplings stood, he approached the fourth tree—the banyan, symbol of shelter.
He knelt and struck Pufaya’s drum once under its canopy. The sprout beside it trembled. The other saplings swayed.
Indrakamani placed her hand on Lakshmana’s shoulder.
“You carry not just seed—but lineage.”
“You carry not just vows—but alliance.”
The elders rose and drummed. Women placed lotus-shaped memory flags at the base of each sapling.
The saplings—mahua, sal, tamarind, banyan, wood apple, mahua rashik, khejri—stood taller, leaves fresh with promise.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- The Court of Ember merges Gond court imagery with ritual fire—binding vows not with law, but with elemental memory.
- The seven embers correspond to earlier vows—symbolic unification of trials into ritual emblem.
- Returning through the underworld caves symbolizes ancestral inheritance: this journey echoes past vow-bearers.
- The final return at the sapling grove represents spreading alliance and rooted memory across landscapes.

Let embers record this vow:
The Court sees not crown—
but root.
No law carved in stone,
But breath in flame.
Seven trials made seven
embers:
Seed. Silence. Drum. Root.
Vow. Alliance. Memory.
Pufaya offered drum,
Lakshmana offered vow.
Indrakamani offered breath.
The flame did not burn flesh
—
It kindled purpose.
In the underworld caves,
The past whispered your
names in caves of stone.
The ancient forest
remembered your steps.
When you returned, not as
exile,
But as drum-guardian—
The banyan canopy
whispered approval:
Your alliance lives.
Seven sprouted saplings
stand—
Not for crowns, but song.
Let memory flow from
embers through leaf—
Let alliances breathe in root
and wind.
Let courts crumble into dust
That saplings may rise.

O forest, carry this drumbeat
Across plains and hidden
river.
Lakshmana walked not just
back—
But forward into legacy.
Carry your promise under
leaf-lit sky,
Through silent root, through
oath of drum.
We register no kingdom.
We accept no crown.
We claim only forest
memory.
When empire rallies swords,
We rally seed and rhythm.
When forgetting marches,
We stand rooted in song.
Forest songs rise not on wind
or drum alone,
But through vow and root
and wind-song union.
This forest knows your pact.
These embers remember
your vow.
These roots will carry your
names.
O forest, you shall never
forget this alliance.
Through drum-beating,
ember-lighting, and
seed-planting—
The memory lives.

Lakshmana and Rani Pufaya set out from the grove at dawn, carrying sapling shoots from the seven sacred trees alongside the iron-headed snake drum. Their journey unfolded across patchwork clearings: burned-out villages, silent shrines, scorched temple ruins, and deserted riverbanks. With each stop, they gathered Gond elders and villagers, setting the saplings in soil once drenched in sorrow.

At each planting, Pufaya beat her cobra-scale drum against the earth. The sound rippled outward, drawing people from huts and fields to stand barefoot until memory found them.

Lakshmana spoke:

“These roots carry our vow. The drum carries our oath. Let their song rise where names vanish.”

Villagers knitted ghungroo chains and painted leaf-symbols on doorposts; women wove lullabies into harvest cloth, turning them into rolling archives of rhythm and history.

In one village, Lakshmana sipped water from a well whose clay etched ancient glyphs. He soaked the sapling roots in it before planting, and the well sang back the names of mothers lost to displacement.

In another, at a burned temple, local children pressed silent foreheads to the drum and spoke missing words into its hollow. Thus, sowing trees became ritual of remembrance; drumming became act of renewal; telling the story became transferring responsibility. For the next two months, traveling drummers—young Gond youth—chanted the chronicle of Lakshmana’s trials at village hearths and forest crossroads, sewing the tale into the oral soil of Gond memory. The pledge was no longer private—it had become community covenant.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- The act of planting saplings across multiple communities mirrors Gond seed-sharing traditions and collective ecological resistance.
- Traveling drummers echo historical Gond Pandvani bards who transmitted mythic episodes orally across estates and forests.
- The weaving of lullabies into cloth signifies how Gond women encode memory into everyday objects, preserving narrative continuity.
- Wells and burnt shrines stand as living archives; rebinding gravely lost stories into communal life.

We planted not for empire,
 But for forest breath.
Every sapling rooted
 At the mouth of memory.
Every drum struck
 In soil burned by forgetting.
O daughters of flame,
 O sons of root—
 Let seed and rhythm
 Be your covenant.
Where temple ashes lay
silent,
 Let drums speak names
again.
Where wells bore no mark,
 Let water trace the mothers'
songs.
Through fields, through
forests,
 Let young drummers chant
of vows—
 Not of kings,
 But of memory returned.
When seeds break earth's
surface,
 Let petals mark the
promises.

When rhythms echo in
community circles,
 Let silence vanish.
We carry no weapons
 Only saplings and
drumbeats.
We reclaim not kingdoms
 But forest memory.
Let names erased be sewn to
soil—
 Let grief be grafted into
groove.
O villagers, become keeper
of root and drum,
 Let the forest's alliance be
your family.
In this pledge, the forest
breathes.
The drum does not demand
empire.
 The sapling does not ask for
crowns.
 They ask:
 Remember.
 Resist.
Re-grow.
And if the world forgets,
 Let you carry.
 Let you plant.
 Let you sing.

THE COUNCIL OF FOREST ELDERS AND THE PACT DECLARATION

In a remote clearing ringed by giant sal and banj trees, Lakshmana and Rani Pufaya called together a Council of Forest Elders from seven local Gond clans. Beneath an open sky, they arranged a circle of drum mounds, saplings, ancient tools, and vellum strips of bark bearing glyphs and songs. From the periphery, Tungar watched while torchlight flickered over elder faces, etched with lines drawn by displacement, resistance, and ancestral grief. As imperial envoys arrived on horseback—carrying proclamations of law, titles, and orders—Pufaya stood forward. She raised her drum, and its deep echo swallowed the envoy's tread. The council's drums joined hers. The envoys froze; horse hooves refused to move.

Lakshmana stepped into the circle:

"These envoys carry written law. We carry inherited law—the right of memory, rooted in seed, drum, and wound."

He gestured to the seven saplings planted around the circle. "Let these stand as living jurisdiction—forest law derives not from palace edict, but from the vows we hold."

One envoy sneered: “We bring royal decree—what can a forest guardian do without king’s sanction?”
Pufaya struck her cobra-scale drum. The sound fractured into seven pulses—a sign of fractures healed by alliance and memory. The earth trembled beneath the saplings. From each sprout emerged a small glyph carved in the soil—signifying each vow and clan pledge.
An elder rose:
“We accept not your commission. We enact forest jurisdiction. From here forth, the court of ember and root recognizes memory as law. The drum is our seal. The sapling our code.”
The imperial envoys looked uneasy. One whispered in command: “Withdraw.” The horse hooves clicked away into the darkness.
The council sang the oath—each clan reciting their pledge in syllables carried on the wind. Petals dropped from ti leaf offerings. Drums sounded for seven long minutes. Memory was declared sovereignty.When it ended, Lakshmana lifted his hand:
“Let this declaration traverse every village, pine, and riverbank in Gond lands. Let forest alliances guard what kingdoms cannot.”

Pufaya joined and spoke:
“We do not ask permission. We claim what is ours by right.”
They departed, torchlight fading behind the ring. The saplings glowed faintly under moonlight, and the glyphs in soil hummed with renewed life.

Cultural & Symbolic Notes

- The Council of Elders reflects Gond participatory decision-making: law from collective memory, not written code.
- Imperial envoys’ arrival and symbolic defeat by drum echo represent tribal sovereignty over royal decree.
- The planting and activation of seven saplings as living code: forest law anchored in living ecology.
- The oath sung in clan tongues, sealed by rituals, emphasizes oral tradition as authority.

We convened beneath sal and banj,
 Not for coronets, but for crownless law.
Each clan pledged root and rhythm,
 Seven saplings, seven hearts, one chorus of memory.
Not paper holds our law—
 But soil, drum, and vow.
When envoys came bearing ink and titles,
 The forest answered in echo.
No sword rang.
 Only drum pulses—seven.
Let kingdoms crumble under crowns.
 Let law fail in palaces of gold.
Our council claimed sovereignty in seed.
Our court sealed decrees with clustered saplings.
Our law whispered through willow-wind,
 Through roots that bear names erased.
When emperors stand in stone halls,
 We stand in rhythm, unshackled.

Memory is not a privilege.
 It is inheritance.
We accept no crown.
 We demand no kingdom.
We inherit land not by conquest,
 But by preserving root, drum, and name.
O forest, sing this pact—
 Spread it across river and ridge.
When empire writes in ink,
 We carve glyphs in sapling rings.
This vow is not binding by fear,
 But by root-debt, song-pledge, and living forest.
Let our children learn the oath in lullaby,
 Let our elders hum it under night's fire.
From council ring to river bed,
 From sapling grove to driftwood shrine,
 Memory lives—
 Through oath, through seed, through drumbeat—
 For forest is law, and root is justice.

Lakshmana, Indrakamani, and Rani Pufaya began their journey back to Ayodhya at dawn. The saplings planted across Gond villages now rooted in soil soaked with memory. The air carried lullabies turned into rhythm, echoing the oath sealed in Council.

As they approached the grand gate of Ayodhya, villagers from neighboring forests lined the path—holding banners painted with root symbols and drum sigils. Young drummers played the memory beats. Elders carried woven flags named for those forgotten. Even local royals paused to listen—not to a prince returning to court, but to a vow-bearing guardian of forest breath.

Rama and Sita received them in the courtyard before the palace, where feasts prepared for welcoming heroes waited unnoticed. Rani Pufaya alone entered, her iron-cobra drum against her chest, Lakshmana and Indrakamani beside her, seven saplings at their feet.

Rama spoke first:

“Brother and sister, your journey carries weight heavier than crown. Your return is not to rule—but to remind.”

Sita took Lakshmana’s hand.

“Let your vow stand as forest guard. Let your roots grow where power falters.”

Rama nodded. “From here onward, the forest borders remain under your watch—not as empire’s edge, but as living boundary. Let saplings stand as markers of sacred law.” They were given a small pavilion in the outskirts of the palace where drums would sound at twilight only when memory demanded. From there, Lakshmana sent guardians into the forest—forest court judges, drum-couriers, seed-sowers—under the authority of the Gond sovereignty oath. Rani Pufaya returned to her palace deep in Rakshasa lands, pledging to uphold the drum alliance. Indrakamani remained with Lakshmana, tending saplings, recording names, and setting roots in ceremony. Their partnership established a new guardianship—a forest sovereignty parallel to Ayodhya’s empire.

O memory-shapers, you
walked not to sit on throne,
 But to cradle root and drum
beneath Ayodhya's crown.
Not to rule, but to remind.
 Your final step is not for
empire—
 But for sacred breath in
forest hands.
Rama offers forest border,
 Not kingdom, but covenant.
Sita gives vow her strength—
 That memory may become
living law.
Your saplings stand guard,
not at gates,
 But at the edges of
forgetting.
Pufaya returns to serpent
lands,
 Not as queen—but as drum-
carrier of justice.
Indrakamani remains root-
bearing,
 Naming the unnamed,
planting hope in grief.
Let empire build monuments
of stone.
 Let courts enforce the
written word.

Your guardianship is
stronger—
 Woven into sapling rings
and drumbeats heard at
forgetting's dusk.
Forest sovereignty runs not
on swords,
 But on seed, rhythm, and
shared vow.
When memory stirs in
child's lullaby—
 When roots break soil in
burnt fields—
 Know that you walk still—
 Not in shadow,
 But in promise.
O Ayodhya of golden walls—
hear the forest breathe
beyond stone.
O forest of silent grief—rise
not as ruin,
 But as living covenant.
They do not hold title or
crown.
 They hold rhythm's oath.
Let the drum echo inaudibly
to empire.
 Let forest law grow quietly
through roots.
For where sovereignty is
woven in seed and song,
 Memory does not fade—it
endures.

CHAPTER 3 – PART 1: MARRIAGE TO TIRYAPUL – THE SKY-WOVEN QUILLED BRIDE,

Lakshmana’s porters carried him across windswept highlands and river valleys until they reached the edge of sky—Tiryapur, the aerial realm of princess Tiryapul, known as the sky-woven quilled bride. No path led there—only songs and storms guided the way.

As dusk fell, Lakshmana stood upon a granite cliff where mountain mist curled in silver bands. Above him, feathers drifted down from unseen wings, and the horizon melted into cloud. He closed his eyes: in the distance he heard it, faint yet unmistakable—a quil stood upright, its humming resonance rippling among hills.

The sky parted just enough for her arrival. Tiryapul descended, suspended on woven feathers and fresh dew, her gown spun from storm-gauze and quilled birdsong. She spoke in tone neither human nor divine, conveying two truths at once:

“I weave the air into rhythm—as rain weaves into soil. Who hears me becomes carrier of sky.”

Lakshmana bowed. Behind him, Pufaya and Indrakamani stood with quiet strength, witness to this celestial union.

The Sky-Weaving Trial

Tiryapul guided him to a circular glade where ten naked lights—anthills glowing with bioluminescent moss—circled a shallow basin of mysterious skywater. In the basin's center floated a quill dipped in rain-sap.

"This quill hums with sky secrets," she said. "Write your vow on skywater—or not at all."

Lakshmana knelt, placed the quill to the water's surface, and whispered seven vows:

1. I weave memory into wind,
2. I carry stories above silence,
3. I root storm into forest,
4. I name what forgetting denies,
5. I hold both quill and drum in promise,
6. I guard seed, thunder, sisterhood,
7. I honor forest above crown.

Each vow rippled across water. The basin illuminated, revealed reflections not of self—but of trees, rivers, burned shrines, lost children, broken drums.

Tiryapul nodded. The quill glowed gold, floated upward, then dissolved into mist. Descending birds gathered the vapors, carried them into sky.

"You have carried sky into root," she said. "You are forest's memory now."

Lakshmana accepted a feather-staff of quills and cosmic moss, entwined with seed thread. He had become sky-guardian as well as forest keeper.

Cultural & Symbolic Elements

- Tiryapul's realm bridges sky and forest, embodying Gond reverence for wind gods and rain deities.
- The skywater and quill trial mirrors Gond belief that cloud spirits carry ancestral songs. Writing vow on water symbolizes impermanence transformed into legacy.
- The feather-staff becomes a staff of record—a living chronicle weaving sky (wisdom), forest (memory), and seed (resilience).

You came not from palace, but from cloud broken into song,
Child of quill and storm, spinning wind and seed.
Tiryapul, sky’s bride, named not for empire, but for breath.
She asked not for vow—but for memory written in water.
The quill dipped, the vow spoken,
Reflection not of Lakshmana—but of forests burned,
Mothers silenced, drums broken, seeds stolen.
Skywater trembled,
Then clarified: memory is breeze, and vow is rain.
Feather-staff granted, not for power,
But for song—carrying sky’s echo into rooted earth.
Now Lakshmana carries thunder, rain, quill, and seed.
Not as ruler—but as recorder of sky’s breath and soil’s grief.
Let clouds pause above forest.
Let birds hum the vow from mountain peak.

A union formed—not in wedding hall—but in whisper of feather and flood of memory.
This forest will wear sky’s quiet.
 Its drums will speak not only of thunder, but of cloud-song.
Let kingdoms bow to cloud-built vow,
 Let rivers lean into quill-made chant.
You carry not robe or crown,
 But quill and staff,
 Storm-woven staff and seed-threaded vow—
 Guardians of sky and root.
Where empire marks ground in stone,
 You mark wind in feather.
Memory flies not in parchment,
 But in quill-born breath.
O forest, receive this union:
 Sky’s quill and soil’s root forged in one vow.
O sky, bless this alliance:
 Till quill dissolves into mist and seed roots through ash.

At dawn, Lakshmana, Indrakamani, and Pufaya set out across wind-swept plateaus toward Bijulidevi, daughter of the storm-serpent king. Their journey crossed thunder-scarred hills and salt plains, guided by the glow of phosphorescent lichens and distant lightning flares that marked Bijulidevi's realm.

They followed an ancient river of hardened glass—the Lightning-Serpent Pool, known to resonate with thunder pulses. Locals said Bijulidevi lived at the pool's center, seated on a throne carved from serpent scales and lava-black basalt. Around her lay pools of translucent water, filled not with rain, but thunder itself.

When they approached, Lakshmana witnessed lightning flash underwater, sending rippling pulses outward. Queer ripples made sound.

A voice called:

"You come carrying sky, root, and seed. Now prove your vow not through drum or quill—but through silence and sacrifice."

A cobra-coiled path circled the pool. Bijulidevi rose, her skin pattern shifting like storms, a halo of light above her hair. Her staff was a live, radiant serpent—eyes glowing molten.

The Trial of Silence: Walking the Serpent Path

Without a word, Bijulidevi beckoned Lakshmana to follow the glowing path. He stepped barefoot and silent. Water hissed. Storm-pulses beat in the reflection. Each step echoed ancient grief: rivers polluted, forests razed, families erased. He felt each memory in his flesh, each vow in his lungs.

At the pool’s center, he knelt. Bijulidevi offered a cup of thunderwater—a translucent liquid churning with light. He drank.

The memories multiplied: names unspoken, drums silenced, seeds stolen, script erased. Yet he did not waver. He did not curse. He carried each vow in his chest.

The Ritual of Rain-Root Binding

Then Bijulidevi guided Lakshmana to a basalt platform. She handed him a coiled serpent-root—a living vine braided with lightning sap and seed threads. He pressed it against his pulse. The vine entwined, each coil a promise.

“This is the Rain-Root,” she said. “Your vow now lives not only in staff and seed—but within you.”

The pool glowed beneath their feet. The serpent-root pulsed with his heartbeat.

Bijulidevi nodded, stepping back into the flashing haze. She let Lakshmana return with her blessing.

Cultural & Symbolic Notes

- The Lightning-Serpent Pool refers to Gond cosmology of naga-kings and thunder spirits—thunder as intelligence, serpent as memory.
- Walking the path in silence tests inner connection to loss; echoing the silence trials of Part 5 earlier and spiritual reckoning.
- Drinking thunderwater symbolizes internalizing collective grief and forest memory—to carry it in blood and bone.
- The serpent-root becomes living tether: union of rain (renewal), root (memory), and vow (sacrifice).

The pool does not mirror your face,
But reflect the storms your silence carries.
Bijulidevi, daughter of thunder and root,
Tests vow not with blade—but with memory.
You walked the serpent's path barefoot,
Not to conquer,
But to feel the grief sleeping beneath glass.
You drank not water—but thunder.
You swallowed grief,
And made it blood.
Now the Rain-Root coils in your chest:
Seed-thread braided with storm.
Memory entwined with breath.
Your vow is no longer written by drum or quill—
It is lived in your pulse.
Let kingdoms carve statues,
We carry root in our rib-cage.
Let courts bind with ink,
We bind with serpent-vine in blood.

O forest children, hear this vow:
When storm silences, the serpent-root whispers.
When drums sleep, the vine pulses.
Lakshmana hears not kingdom—but memory.
Not empire—but forest.
His heart holds river names,
Earth wounds,
Lost lullabies.
Let the pool tremble beneath empire's foot,
Let the serpent-vine keep allegiance.
When forgetting marches,
Let your pulse protest.
When silence deepens,
Let root speak in flesh.
O forest and sky—unite.
In vow, in root, in serpent's coil.
The guardian now carries storm and seed,
Not for glory—but for memory.

Lakshmana returned from Bijulidevi’s realm as dawn broke. The forest around the sapling grove lay heavy with mist. The rainbow-colored birdcalls arrived slowly, the world awakening in reverence to his vow. He carried Pufaya’s snake-scale drum, Indrakamani’s golden seedstaff, and Tiryapul’s quill-staff—a triumvirate of memory, song, and sky.

Indrakamani awaited him by the banyan sapling, now four stories high in whispered form. She knelt as Lakshmana knelt before her.

No crown, she said. Only three instruments: root, drum, quill.

I accept you not as exile returned—but as alliance embodied.

Tungar led the circle of elders. Each held an emblem:

- Eldest held a coil of serpent-root (Bijulidevi)
- Second held a quill-woven staff (Tiryapul)
- Third held a drum stick forged in cobra-scale (Pufaya)
- Together they formed a triangle of ritual symbols under banyan limbs.

Lakshmana spoke:
I vow to guard these instruments—not for silver throne, but for forest truth.
 My voice will carry seed song, root-lore, and sky-knotted chant
 Across hills where names are spoken again.
Indrakamani placed three threads on his brow—thread of quill (sky), seed thread (root), drum string (song). The elders drummed in unison. Birds answered.
They raised him upright. No scepter. No crown. Only symbolic hand on shoulder, staff by side.
 He rose as Forest-Sky Keeper—the living node of forest sovereignty and sky covenant.
When he spoke again, his words carried seed-weight and thunder breath:
Let this alliance live beyond forest grove—
 Let it become vow for every barren plain, every broken drum.
Elders scattered petals; children touched his feet. Women sang lullabies turned into oral law.
 Shadow priests drew glyphs in ash around the banyan roots: seed spiral, drum coil, cloud-prism.
Each sapling trembled. Each staff quivered.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- The triumvirate of instruments symbolizes the three alliances—forest, drum, sky—as ritual embodiment rather than royal insignia.
- Knotting the three threads (quill-thread, seed thread, drum string) on the brow follows Gond binding rituals where union is declared via intertwined fibers.
- The banyan tree remains the central memory archive; his coronation beneath it ties him to deep roots and sacred continuity.
- His vow frames a living guardianship: forest border as sovereignty and instrument-staffs as memory-keepers.

You rise not as prince,
But as living knot of root, song, and sky.
The forest crowns you not with gold,
But with threads of seed, drum-string, quill.
Indrakamani placed soft vow upon your brow,
Tying memory, rhythm, sky-breath into one cord.
Pufaya's drum breathes in your chest.
Tiryapul's quill hums in your fingertips.
The golden seed pulsed at your heart.
You are no exile returned—but jubilation in root.
You are no king born—but alliance in sure rhythm.
Forest elder hands rest on your shoulders,
Passing strength not in iron, but in drum-pulse.
Children pledge petals at your feet,
Mothers sing lullabies as law.
Bird-voices echo across sapling rings:
You are the Forest-Sky Keeper now.

Let kingdoms write on stone walls.
You write vow in living staff and root.
Let courts legislate titles.
You legislate remembrance through quill, drum, and seed.
When forgetting gathers like dust,
Let your instruments speak names again.
When drought steals root from earth,
Let seed pulse beneath flame of memory.
When storms break silence,
Let the quill-staff refine your breath into song.
Forest, receive your guardian.
Sky, bless your sentinel.
For where instruments unite —
Root, drum, quill—
There memory becomes sovereignty.
O Lakshmana, Forest-Sky Keeper,
Walk not in exile,
But in promise carried.
And let every leaf remember this day—
When alliance became crown.

Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, and Tiryapul convened at the boundary where forest meets ridge, on a plateau crowned with ancient stones that always caught stormwind. Sacred saplings—mahua, sal, tamarind, banyan, wood apple, mahua-rashik, and khejri—stood planted in a circle. At its center rested the three staffs: cobra-scale drumstick, quill staff, and golden seedstaff.

Villagers, elders, and forest priests gathered at dusk. No torches—only bioluminescent lichen and distant lightning to illuminate the space. The wind howled soft patterns, weaving ritual chants into the ceremony.

Tiryapul stepped forward and raised her quill staff.

“Sky breath speaks: alliance forged in breath becomes covenant of wind.”

She traced skywind glyphs in soft air, and the gathered crowd fell silent. Lakshmana then lifted the cobra drumstick.

“Drum-voice echoes: memory carried in rhythm becomes bridge between storm and root.”

He struck a single beat. It reverberated so deeply that stones hummed. Pufaya struck again. Twice. Three times. The rim glowed faintly, glowing seeds at their feet pulsed in rhythm.

Indrakamani approached with the seedstaff; each plant sprouted one leaf taller at her step. “Seed-vow grows: from grief, root rises; from silence, song buds.”
When the three instruments had spoken in turn, the crowd knelt. Elders offered root-wine in bowls carved from shell; women sprinkled sapling blossoms. Children wove clay thumb-impress glyphs into soft mud before each staff.
Then Lakshmana spoke:
“We unite sky, song, and root—not to conquer but to remember. Let this pact be uttered across forests and ridges, into every village burned, every child's lullaby, every drum left broken.”
Around them, saplings leaned inward. Thunder rolled in distance. The first raindrop fell on Tiryapul’s quill. Lakshmana and Pufaya raised their staffs in parallel, planting them briefly into the ground so their power pulsed into root-soil.

The drums resumed—deeper as the rain gathered. The crowd rose, voices joining in chant:
“We carry memory. We carry alliance. We carry song, seed, sky.”
Even the saplings hummed.
When the rain ceased, a trail of fallen petals and lightning-moss glittered; instruments glowed faintly under moonlight. This alliance ritual had woven forest, sky, memory, community—and gave birth to what Elders began calling the covenant of storm-root.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- This ritual consolidates all three alliances—Cobra-Staff (drum), Quill-Staff (sky), Seed-Staff (root)—into a unified covenant.
- Conducted at a natural boundary (forest-ridge plateau) and timed with storm signals Gond reverence for controlling multiple elements.
- Community participation through bowls of root-wine, blossom-sprinkling, clay glyphs ties individual memory into shared ceremony.
- The trio’s staffs planted into earth symbolize the integration of sky and drum into forest roots.

We stood at the edge of wind and earth,
 Not as sovereigns, but as memory-keepers.
Tiryapul raised sky’s quill and etched promise,
 Drum-voice pulsed through bones,
 Seed-vow sprouted beneath foot.
Sky staff spoke of cloud-breath,
 Drum beat spoke of communal vow,
 Seedstaff spoke of root-memory.
Together, they wove covenant of storm-root,
 Not for throne, but for forest’s inheritance.
The saplings leaned into alliance;
 Roots and wind and rhythm fused in soil.
Elders knelt. Women wept blossoms.
 Children shaped mud-glyphs of oath.
Let this covenant rise in every fire-circle,
 Every burnt shrine, every river-bend.
May storm-breath fall soft on sapling rings,
 May drum-echo preserve names in bone-memory,
 May seed-vow root in orphaned fields.

This is not magic. It is promise.
 Not empire. It is inheritance.
Let storms carry our song into ridge-valleys,
 Let roots inscribe our memory in earth’s belly.
 Let drum beat join quill’s chant, seed’s song.
We stand not as rulers, but as breath-guardians.
When forgetting marches like a storm,
 We remain storm-root covenant.
Memory does not sleep in stone;
 It lives in wind-etched glyphs,
 In drum-pulse, in seed-sprout, in cloud-sung breath.
Let the world mark borders in maps.
 We mark alliance in soil, sky, song.
O forest, O sky, O tribe—remember this ritual,
 For through storm and root, the vow endures.

Spring’s first thunder rumbled through the forest, announcing the Festival of Storm-Root. Months of covenant-making now culminated in a night of communal renewal. Torchlight and moonrise intertwined over the sapling grove. The air held the scent of petrichor and mahua blossom.
Villagers gathered amid the seven saplings. Drums echoed softly at first, building into thunder-pulse as Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, and Tiryapul entered the circle, each carrying their staff and a bowl of rainwater mixed with root-wine.
Elders seated themselves around a central stone altar carved with the entwined imagery of lightning, quill, seed, and root. The four vow-bearers approached together.
Lakshmana spoke:
“By sky’s vow, by drum’s memory, by seed’s breath—I call this festival the Feast of Storm-Root.”
He poured his bowl at the altar.
Pufaya and Tiryapul followed, each pouring from staffs’ bowls to merge their waters into one pool in the stone’s depression.
Indrakamani sprinkled petals around its edges.
The saplings shimmered in response; leaves quivered in evening wind.

Musicians struck chords on clay rattles, drums, and reed flutes. Flames rose from torches, skyrolled with thunderlight. Villagers began moving in concentric circles—step by step, beat by beat—dancing the covenant into physical rhythm.

Each leader stepped forward to bless their element:

- Pufaya struck the drum and called out names of lost ancestors, each beat echoing in the tribal heart.
- Tiryapul traced sky-glyphs in the mist, then released feathered lanterns that rose into the storm.
- Indrakamani laid seeds of red millet at sapling bases, naming fields that once went fallow.
- Lakshmana lifted the united staff and spoke:

“Let this alliance travel. Across burnt lands, over river strands, into people’s hands. Let saplings and stories be planted in every clearing in Gond country. And let this alliance be future’s inheritance.”

At his words, villagers took sapling cuttings, lantern-lit paths ahead of them to carry covenant outward—across valleys, plains, tribal homelands. Elders proclaimed:
“The Festival ends not in grove, but across our realms. Our pact is not ritual—but living inheritance.”
They danced into dawn. By sunrise, everyone had marched south, east, north, and west—departing in small processions to spread saplings, drumbeats, bird-lanterns, and the story of storm-root.
That morning, the four walked back through the grove—exhausted, rain-washed, glowing. They understood: the covenant had grown beyond persons into memory-networks of seed, sound, feather, and root.

Cultural & Symbolic Notes

- The Festival of Storm-Root marks ritual renewal, communal affirmation, and transmission of covenant roots into future generations.
- Four-part blessing mirrors Gond praxis of integrating sky, storm, earth, and memory.
- Community participation through dance, lanterns, sapling processions echoes Gond seasonal festivals where collective action reinforces ecological bonds.
- Departing processions symbolize living tradition—not ritual frozen in space, but active return to every village.

The storm rose inside us,
 Yet we offered seed at its feet.
Eyes met under thunder-blade sky,
 Hands passed sapling and lantern flame.
Pufaya beat the drums—
blood of ancestors rose,
 Names forgotten found voice in rhythm.
Tiryapul let feathered lanterns ride lightning-birth,
 Sky memory carried to cloud-born heights.
Indrakamani planted seeds of red millet beneath saplings,
 Turning burnt soil into heart-song.
Lakshmana united all four elements—
 Pouring their waters into the stone's bowl—
 Calling this Feast of Storm-Root.
The grove became living altar.
The forest, witness.
 Villagers, heartbeat of the covenant.
We danced not for joy,
 But for inheritance.

Each sapling, each lantern, each drumbeat—
 Carried alliance beyond boundary, beyond grove.
Festival blooms in every dawn march,
 In every cutting planted in tired land.
The covenant is no relic—
 It is weaving ourselves into forest and sky.
When forgetting grows like vine,
 Let lantern flame guide us home.
When drought steals root,
 Let seed memory break earth's crust.
When silence pounds fields,
 Let drum's heartbeat declare names aloud.
O forest-sky covenant keepers—
 Let this festival echo in every clearing,
 In every drop of rain,
 In every drum-beat born anew.
We stand not just in grove,
 But in hundreds of homes, soils, skies, pulses, memories
—
 Because alliance lives not in stone,
 But in our walking.

CHAPTER 4 – PART 1: SHABARI’S TRUTH: THE FOREST ELDER’S OFFERING

Dawn light sifted through thick sal leaves as Lakshmana, Indrakamani, and their forest companions—Pufaya, Tiryapul, and Tungar—approached a clearing marked by ancient stone boundaries. Here lived Shabari, a forest elder renowned across Gond villages for her hospitality, her knowledge of forest lore, and the jagged hunger within her heart. She lived alone in a hut of woven grass, attended only by birds, monkeys, and the whispering trees. Shabari emerged as they entered, leaning on a staff carved with root glyphs that pulsed under her grip. Her eyes were bright, her posture straight as she welcomed them.

Lakshmana bowed deeply.

“We come not as heroes or princes,” he said. “We come as carriers of forest covenant.”

Shabari nodded.

“I know your drum, your quill and your seed. I saw smoke rise from Chandi-Ghati.”

“But I ask one offering: your hunger.”

They paused.

“Our hunger?”

“Yes,” she said. “Not for hunger of food. Hunger of memory yet to be named. Hunger of forests yet to sing. Only you can offer hunger itself — acknowledge it, bind it, carry it forward.”

The group settled around a fire. Shabari gathered wild berries—bitter with salt and topsoil. She roasted them on embers. The aroma carried stones of sorrow, of famine.

The Offering of Hunger
Shabari handed each a berry.
“Eat,” she said. “Taste hunger.”
They chewed. Each berry was sweet, then sharp, then gone. Then hunger rose again—not for food, but for something missing.
“You must carry this hunger,” she explained.
“Because hunger is the forest’s pulse after famine. It is memory wounded, not healed. It is drums not yet made. It is drumbeats unsung. It is petals unsown. Hunger remembers what was stolen—and what has not yet returned.”
Indrakamani closed her eyes, tasting emptiness. Pufaya’s drum resonated softly in her lap. Tiryapul’s quill staff swayed with memory. Lakshmana pressed a hand to his chest. Tungar watched in solemn witness.
Shabari continued:
“Now speak your hunger vow. Bind it to the three staffs.”

Lakshmana began:
“I vow to remain hungry—for erased languages, forgotten lullabies, unborn generations. I vow to seek not comfort, but truth. I will not rest until every missing name walks in memory.”
He pressed his words into the flame, letting their vapour drift into leaves.
Pufaya followed: she vowed to drum until bones speak and hills remember. Tiryapul vowed to write sky-songs for fields without rain. Indrakamani vowed to plant hunger seeds with every sapling, so hunger becomes promise.

The Binding Ritual
Shabari struck her staff on the ground; it glowed with root-pattern runes. She touched the three staffs to hers. The staffs hummed in resonance. She sprinkled forest ash upon their palms, sealing the vow.
“You have offered hunger.”
“Hunger now joins your pact.”
“Let it guide your steps through drought, through silence, through forgetting.”
The clearing exhaled. Birds stirred. The forest listened.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- Hunger in Gond ritual symbolizes ancestral loss, famine, and cultural erasure. Offering it becomes ritual remembrance and reclamation.
- Shabari as forest elder embodies Gond matriarchal wisdom—she carries hunger for unnamed memory and demands that others acknowledge the wound.
- Binding hunger to the Covenants marks a deepening of their vow—no longer just alliance, but ongoing responsibility to wounded pasts.
- The ash ritual echoes Gond mortar ceremonies—using burnt forest material to seal oaths.

Hunger is not absence—it is
forest’s pulse after famine.
It is not cry. It is whisper of
root unwatered.
It is lilt of lullabies unsung.
It is drumbeat yet unmade.
It is seed that trembles
beneath frost.
O Lakshmana, you tasted
eternity’s ache.
O Pufaya, your drum carried
unborn bones.
O Tiryapul, your quill wrote
sky for forests not yet grown.
O Indrakamani, your seed-
staff bore hunger-root in
sapling earth.
Hunger is not foe—it is
covenant’s marrow.
It reminds you what was
stolen, what awaits return.
It keeps your steps honest.
It makes your oath live
beyond comfort.

Shabari named your pact—
not by memory, but by
hunger.
Not to break you—but to
direct you.
When drought comes, sing
hunger.
When silence falls, name
hunger.
When the world moves on,
carry your hunger.
Not as burden—but as guide.
Let hunger speak where
names cannot.
Let hunger drum where
seeds will grow.
Let hunger write sky where
quill may bloom.
For where hunger walks,
memory rises.
And the forest knows—not
sensation—but covenant.

Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, and Tiryapul returned to the Sapling Grove at dawn. The seven young trees stood resilient, and beneath them, Shabari’s hunger-vow had taken root. The group gathered household members—farmers, gatherers, elders—around an open clearing beside the banyan.

At its center lay a granary bound not to empire, but to forest sustenance: woven baskets of millets, pulses, tubers, forest roots, and seeds. The granary’s frame was built from fallen sal timber, lashed with vine, standing as communal store. Lakshmana placed his staff near its entrance, Pufaya laid her drum at its base, Tiryapul tucked her quill-staff upright inside its frame, and Indrakamani arranged seed packets on makeshift shelves.

Shabari stepped forward:

“This granary holds more than food—it holds hunger’s memory. We plant not for harvest alone, but for refusal to forget.”

Each villager stepped forward with a handful of root or seed—remembrance of famine, of fields taken, of stores burned. Baskets filled quickly. Lacings of seed thread crisscrossed tubers; drum-ribbons wrapped pulse-pouches; quill-feathers marked grains whose names would otherwise be lost.

The Hunger-Ritual Festival
At twilight, the Hunger-Ritual Festival began. Villagers, drummers, and ritual priests encircled the granary. A hush fell.
Shabari began:
“We are hungry not for food alone, but for named memory. We are hungry for fathers unspoken. We are hungry for seeds erased.”
Lakshmana struck Pufaya’s drum once. The sound rumbled through the granary frame. Tiryapul dipped her quill in rainwater and inscribed the names of forgotten crops, lost villages, famine memories onto bamboo bark. Each inscription became symbolic labels on the seed baskets.
Indrakamani lit a small fire below the granary and placed a seed-staff-marked branch. The fire glowed through the woven basket and around the saplings beyond.
A communal chant arose:
“We bind hunger so memory may feast. We bind seed so hunger may heal.”
Villagers danced in concentric rings, each holding root or seed. The fire flickered. The granary frame shivered with rhythm.

Sealing the Hunger Vow

At the festival’s peak, Shabari climbed the granary frame. She untied a vine and released seven seed-filled pouches into the fire. As each pouch burned, its ashes fell upon the saplings and the granary — sealing the vow.

She called:

“Let hunger guide planting. Let hunger guard the granary. Let hunger speak for unspoken names.”

The crowd responded with song. They sang of famine-stories, forest remembers, drum echoes, quill-records.

The night carried the sound far. Into forest corridors, into river gullies, into village homes.

Cultural & Symbolic Notes

- This festival combines food ritual with memory-preservation—common in Gond traditions after drought.
- Granary represents communal sustenance, not royal stockpiling—gift economy over property.
- Burning seed-pouches enacts ritual sacrifice of memory, reconciling grief with future promise.
- The hunger chant reinforces ongoing vigilance, not comfort.

The granary stands not for
plenty—but for remembered
thirst.
Not stone chambers—but
root-bound baskets of
memory.
Seeds and pulses taken in are
names resurrected.
Hunger is not curse—it is
reckoning.
When fields flood with grain,
hunger may sleep.
But hunger must awaken
memory.
Shabari climbed and offered
ashes—
Letting fire seal the vow.
Let ash fall on saplings.
Let hunger's debt bind root.
We dance around grain, not
for dance—but for claim.
We chant not in celebration
—but in accountability.
Our granary is not store—but
living archive.

Each basket holds soil-songs,
famine-names, mother-
voices.
Hunger is oath—woven in
seed-thread,
Hidden in pulse-pouch,
Spoken in drumbeat.
When time's drought
returns,
Let hunger prompt planting.
When forgetting spreads,
Let hunger challenge silence.
Root by root, song by seed,
Hunger will guard the debt
of memory.
This is not end—but
vigilance.
Let our granary become
forest-sentinel,
Let our hunger become
ancestral voice,
Let our memory carry not
just survival—but promise.

COUNCIL OF CLANS AND THE RESTORATION RITUAL

A fortnight after the Hunger-Ritual Festival, gatherings convened across river valleys and hill-spines. Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, Tiryapul, and Shabari traveled by foot—crossing tribal territories—summoning Gond clan elders to the Great Council of Restoration, hosted at the intersection of seven ancient rivers.

Clans arrived bearing offerings: river stones inscribed with ancestral names, baskets of heirloom seed, carved root-glyph rods, and silent drums of mourning. Some came by boat, others on foot—crossroads of people united by ritual memory.

At twilight, the rivers' confluence echoed—water chanting against stones. Beneath banyan arms they sat in a great circle, the forest and river holding its breath.

The Ritual of Waters

Lakshmana stood to speak:

"You carry not logs nor gold, but memory. Today we convene not for power, but for life—forest and field intertwined."

He raised a bowl of river water mixed with seed ash and hunger-dust. Pass-it-to-pass-it—each elder drank, sinking vow into their marrow.

Stormclouds gathered as Pufaya drummed ancient rhythms of flood and drought. The drumbeat made the river pulse with ritual life.

Tiryapul released woven lanterns into the river—they floated downstream carrying hunger-vows tied to song-scrolls.
Indrakamani scattered heirloom seeds into the water—mahua, tamarind, sal sprigs—sowed into current.
Shabari gestured to clay tablets bearing root-glyphs:
“Let these scripts be buried where rivers irrigate fields—so that when waters return, names and memory will flow with seed.”
Village youth carried tablets into shallow waters, sinking them beneath silt.
Ecological Exchanges
Next morning, small groups dispersed. Each clan carried sapling and seed, teaching elders and women how to plant on riverbanks, fallow fields, drought-brittle slopes. They left behind drums and quills as living record kits.
When they parted, Lakshmana spoke:
“Do not tend the forest alone. Tend the rivers. Let forest memory grow into life’s give. For ecological revenge is memory sown.”
They returned to the grove as elders stayed on to begin the first Ecological Restoration Planting, scheduled for the next season.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- The Great Council mirrors Gond traditions of inter-clan assemblies through song, seed, and ritual.
- Water ritual with seed/ash signifies mingling of memory and life—river as conveyor of history.
- Lanterns on water carry personal vows downstream—personal memory becomes collective current.
- Burying glyph tablets links writing-root and river nourishment—turning memory into soil fertility.
- The planting exchanges model Gond seed-sharing networks for ecological restoration.

Seven rivers meet not for flood,
But to carry hunger-vow to distant fields.
Elders drink river and ash,
Seed and sorrow mingle in bone.
Pufaya's drum beckons flood and drought,
Stirring river voices from slumber.
Tiryapul's lanterns drift downstream—
Each light a name reborn in current.
Indrakamani scatters heirloom seed—
Marshaling roots in water's womb.
Shabari buries clay glyphs in silt—
Writing memory into riverbed.
We weave river-memory with forest-seed,
Creating life from grief.
Let each clan carry sapling and song,
Let planting be act, not just ritual.
When rain comes or famine visits,
Let the river remember names.

When forest-roots grow tall,
Let river-water hold our sorrow.
Ecological renewal is ritual—
Rooted in memory, watered by grief.
Ship not wood alone, but song-staff.
Bury not seed alone, but ancestral name.
From river mouth to ridge-slope
Let forest memory become life's cloth.
We do not repair earth with stone—
We repair earth with seed, cord, and chant.
Let hunger-dust thrive in water and soil—
Let memory bloom across riverbanks.
Forest-river covenant stands.
Life grows rooted in song.
Memory does not fade—but lives in leaf, water, drum.

Months later, when the monsoon waned and fields turned green again, villages returned to the Sapling Grove to celebrate renewal. The seven saplings stood tall, their branches woven with lanterns, feather charms, clay glyph tokens, and colored threads—a testament to promises carried and kept.
This was the Great Renewal Festival, marking the first harvest since the Hunger-Ritual and Council rites. Villagers gathered from remote hamlets and riverbanks, each bringing produce: millets, pulses, forest tubers, honey, mahua liquor—offerings of abundance.
A great woven mat laid between the saplings served as communal feast ground. At its center stood a newly crafted Harvest Pact Altar: formed of interlaced sapling branches, seedpods, river stones, and a circle of root-wine. Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, Tiryapul, Shabari, and Tungar approached together, carrying baskets and ritual implements.
Renewal Ritual
Lakshmana spoke:
“We planted not just seeds, but memory. Today we reap harvest not just for hunger—but for harvest of vows.”

He poured root-wine into the altar’s stones.
Pufaya struck the drum once. Villagers followed in chorus; the air vibrated.
Then each leader contributed:

- Tiryapul released feather-lanterns into saplings, and the lanterns floated skyward on warm evening currents.
- Shabari placed a carved root-glyph rod at the altar’s center.
- Indrakamani scattered heirloom seed over each basket.
- Lakshmana lifted the combined staff array, breathing over them a vow:

“Every harvest will feed not only hunger—but memory. Every seed not only planted—but song born. We pledge that this grove, and every planting, remains common heritage—not imperial property.”
The crowd responded with chant:
“Memory grows in each ear of grain. Hunger becomes feast of remembrance.”

Community Feast & Pact Signing
Following the ritual, the crowd feasted. Elders shared stories of famine, of revived springs, of songs regained. Children carried garlands between houses and groves, reminding people of their roles as keepers.

Later, elders signed the Harvest Pact—a communal seed-sharing agreement etched into sapling bark and clay pot shards, kept in the granary. Signatories used river-water ink and root-charcoal.
When the final signature was made, thunder rolled overhead—a blessing from sky and forest.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- The Great Renewal Festival aligns with Gond seasonal rites marking post-monsoon sowing and harvest.
- Feast in grove emphasizes communal property and collective memory, not individual wealth.
- Harvest Pact signing grafts ritual into practical agreement, preserving seed heritage beyond ceremony.
- The sky-tree altar and lanterns symbolize return of sky-blessings to forest; the thunder signifying divine endorsement.

Feast not on grains alone,
But on stories baked into each kernel.
Memory blooms in ear and heart alike.
Let hunger's ghost become harvest's song,
Let seed carry root's covenant.
We planted vows in root and dust,
We gathered harvest in memory and trust.
We offer not tribute to throne,
But pledge to keep grove's breath alive.
Tiryapul's lanterns rise in dusk,
Feather-lights carried into sky's pact.
Pufaya's drum echoes throats of dusk,
Naming ancestors in thunder-clap.
Indrakamani scatters song-seed among us,
Each child carrying hope in palm.
Shabari's root-rod stands witness at altar.
Lakshmana breathes vow into staff array:
"Hunger becomes feasting; memory becomes law."
Youth sign pact in wood and clay,
Roots inked in water of river and vow.
Thunder answers with blessing—or warning.
Tonight we dine not with kings,
But with earth, sky, forest, and memory.
Our feast is not end—but renewal.
Let every harvest renew the covenant,
Let every seed-bean carry name.
Let songs rise with green stalks and rain.
If forgetting returns in drought or exile,
Let this grove's memory guard its soul.
Forest, sky, community, seed
—
Stand as one, guardians of root-song.
O Harvest Pact, grow not in book,
But in belly, in song, in rain-kissed field.
We will remember. We will plant. We will feast.
Memory lives—seed by seed, vow by harvest.

CHAPTER 5 – PART 1: THE CONFRONTATION WITH GREED AND THE REFUSAL OF RAVANA'S LINEAGE

THE CONFRONTATION WITH GREED AND THE REFUSAL OF RAVANA’S LINEAGE

A line of rain-bearing clouds drifted overhead as Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, and Tiryapul journeyed toward the foot of Mount Raksha—the ancestral land once ruled by Ravana’s kin, now fragmented by greed and forgetting. The winds muttered of past plunders; the earth bore scars of deforestation and names erased from memory.

They arrived at a clearing where Ravana’s distant offspring had planted a lavish grove—imported royal palms and foreign species. Among the greenery stood a makeshift throne of brass and bone in equality of bones and metals. Seated there was Prince Mandhaka, a descendant of Ravana—proud, pale, and used to taking what he desired.

Lakshmana stepped forward. The drum, quill, and seed-staff rested upright in the earth before him.

Mandhaka rose and sneered:

“You carry sticks and feathers—and think yourselves guards of trees. I rule by lineage. I claim this grove by right.”

Pufaya’s cobra-scale drum beat once.

Lakshmana remained silent.

Indrakamani spoke:

“You plant palms not for promise, but for profit. You erase forest nations when you forbid native seed.”

Mandhaka laughed:
“My people are few, but my gold is plenty. I invite you to join me—or leave.”
Lakshmana raised the drumstick.
“We claim not lineage—but responsibility. We refuse your crown.”
Mandhaka rose to strike—but Pufaya’s drum spat thunder: DUM…DUM… The ground shuddered. The palms wilted.
Tiryapul stepped forward holding her quill staff.
“Your lineage lies in theft—not truth. You write not in sky, but in gold. You speak not in feast, but in destruction.”
Mandhaka faltered. Indrakamani planted a native seed from her satchel. The earth swallowed it, trembling.
“Your palms will die,” she said. “Your promise ends when credit dies. We are not invited. We remain.”
Mandhaka, seething, stood. Around him, imported palms crumbled. He vanished into the hills.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- This confrontation dramatizes Gond disdain for lineage-based entitlement and ecological greed.
- Imported palms symbolize colonial or elite ecological disruption, standing against native species and memory.
- The invoked instruments—drum, quill, seed-staff—functioned not only as ritual tools but as ecological agents.
- The encounter affirms guardian sovereignty over legacy entitlement.

Not crown—but
responsibility you carry.
Mandhaka claimed grove by
birthright.
You claimed grove by
covenant.
He planted palms for profit.
You planted seeds for
memory.
He wrote bills in gold.
You wrote oaths with quill
on water-air.
He spoke of lineage.
You spoke of life.
Pufaya's drum trembled
ground.
Tiryapul's quill erased his
pathway.
Indrakamani's seed sank into
earth's promise.
Palms of profit wilted under
your breath.
Imported promise crumbled
without song.
You are no prince—but
forest sentinel.

You do not beg crown—but
refuse it.
Let those who claim lineage
buy with loss.
You claim not their gold—
but your land's life.
Mandhaka vanished—but the
grove remained.
Because forest breath is not
leased.
Let feudal crowns wither in
time.
Let memory take root and
stand.
Empire may erect groves for
show,
But forest remembers whose
seeds bear.
Let your refusal be feast for
forgotten roots.
Let this grove stand, not in
wealth,
But in vigilance and song.
You do not conquer—but
avert ruin.
O guardians, carry this
refusal—
In drumbeat, in quill-stroke,
in seed-sprout;
Refuse the theft, preserve
the life.

Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, and Tiryapul gathered elders, villagers, and tribal youth under the charred canopy of the fallen grove. While imported palms lay dying, their roots still claimed space. The air tasted of rot and seed-spice—a reminder that displacement must be undone with care.

Lakshmana addressed the crowd:

“We will not burn what remains. We will return life to this grove by honoring the roots already here—and planting what was stolen.”

They began by clearing invasive palms—gently uprooting each and returning palms to the earth as mulch beneath new foundations. Women collected native seeds—mahua, sal, tamarind—pressing them into soft baskets. Pufaya struck her drum slowly, each beat a call to memory.

Tiryapul inscribed seed names on bamboo plaques—“mahua”, “sal”, “khejri”—tying each plaque to its basket. The youth followed elders’ lead, planting seeds in the empty spaces left by palms.

Indrakamani knelt by a shaded patch and planted a tamarind sapling. As the roots touched earth, she whispered:

“May every branch carry the voices of those lost here. May every fruit remember lullabies forbidden.”

Villagers passed small bowls of root-stew and millet porridge, nourishing hands worn by planting and hearts stirred by purpose. The grove began to revive—green shoots emerging amid mulch and soil.

The Banquet of Roots

At dusk, they constructed a long wooden table under emerging sal branches. The table was laden with forest foods: roasted tubers, seed porridge, mahua wine, honey cakes, fermented grains, wild fruits, root stew, and spiced leaf salads.

Lakshmana stood:

“This banquet is not for feast alone—it is choice. We choose root over profit, memory over exploitation. We plant and we eat with intent.”

They ate with quiet celebration, sharing stories of grove’s past—of mothers who taught song, of children who learned seed’names, of trees that once stood before palm’s invasion. Between servings, each youth placed a plaque next to its planted seed. Elders sprinkled millet-kernel prayers. Drums and quills took up lullabies, turning archive-songs into living melody.

Renewal & Community Promise

When night deepened, they stood around the table. Lakshmana raised his bowl of mahua wine.

“We pledge that this grove will remain native. We vow to guard it with drum, quill, and seed-staff. If palms return, so will our songs; if silence returns, so will our drums. Let every root here be witness.”

They drank. The grove hummed.

Pufaya struck a long drumroll. Drums echoed through trees. Tiryapul released lantern-birds—floating up with promises tied to their feet. Indrakamani placed root seedlings in soil glows.

By dawn, a renewed native grove grew where palms once claimed space—a living reclamation.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- Uprooting invasive palms as act of ecological justice while avoiding destruction aligns with Gond respect for life.
- Plaques with seed names anchor memory and language to individual plants.
- Banquet of roots draws from Gond seasonal feasts celebrating subsistence foods and ancestral knowledge.
- The vow connects ecology, memory, and ritual accountability in a communal setting.

This grove once wore palms
for profit—
 They softened earth but
stole its song.
Today we return root—not
for throne,
 But for soil's quiet covenant.
We laid palms back into
earth not as weapon—
 But as parent mulch for
rebirth.
We buried seed with name-
tags tied—
 Letting memory root in each
plant.
Our banquet of tubers and
seed-porridge—
 Was not feast—but
conscious choosing:
 Root over gold, memory
over sterility.
We spoke not in titles—but
in taste.
 We pledged not in ink—but
in vow's bone.
Youth pressed seed-plaque
beneath soil.
 Elders chanted rain-laments
of return.
Drums breathed as roots
unfolded.
 Quills hummed forest
anthem in twilight.

This grove was resurrected
not by crown—
 But by covenant, care,
memory.
Let palms rot to enrich soil—
 Let roots carry ancestral
names.
When exploitation returns,
 We will drum;
 When silence returns,
 We will plant;
 When forgetting returns,
 We will name again.
We guard not land—but
song-grown roots.
 We nurture not trees—but
memory-born trees.
O grove of reclamation—
 May you stand not in profit
—but in pledge.
May every leaf tremble with
ancestral pulse,
May every fruit carry lullaby
names.
For where root and ritual
unite—
 There forest's soul is
redeemed.

THE FOREST COUNCIL’S RECOGNITION AND THE SEED-CHARTER CEREMONY

Several weeks after the grove’s renewal, the Forest Council of Elders convened under the canopy of the seven saplings. Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, Tiryapul, and Shabari stood at the center, while elders from surrounding villages filled the circle. Ishwar, the council's head, addressed the gathering:

“We have gathered not to decree, but to witness. This grove was broken. It has been restored. Now we forge our forest charter—binding seed, root, drum, quill into lasting practice.”

He gestured to a clay tablet on a flat root-rooted stone—engraved with seven symbols representing memory trials, hunger, ecological renewal, and guardianship.

“This Charter shall travel. Each clan must carry a copy—etching it on bark, clay, or bone—and plant it with a sapling in their territory.”

Lakshmana stepped forward, staff in hand:

“I pledge, as guardian of this charter, to escort copies to every forest grove, every village council, until every seed, drum, quill knows its name and purpose.”

He handed the tablet to Indrakamani, who traced each glyph as elders repeated them aloud. She carefully wrapped it with quill-feathers, drum-string fiber, and a sprig of root.
Pufaya drummed a low steady rhythm. Each beat prompted elders to mimic it. The sound deepened, resonating through earthen stone and sapling buds.
Tiryapul sprinkled luminous pollen over the tablet:
“By sky-shine, this charter shall be seen across fields and hills.”
Shabari then guided villagers in carving smaller replicas from clay, bark, and bone. Each child and adult sculpted a version, embedding personal seed, hunger, tree, or forest symbol.
As dusk fell, torches lit. Each council clan leader sank their copy under their grove’s soil, near a sapling.
Ishwar sealed the ritual:
“Let each planted charter become living testament. Let any erasure be met by new chorus of song, root, and seed.”
He closed with an ancestral chant of seven verses—each verse reflecting one symbol in the Charter.

These saplings bear more
than leaves—
 They bear living law.
Not ink, not edict, not crown
—
 But clay, bark, bone, and
root.
We etch our Charter in living
matter
 So forgetting cannot bury it.
Each clan plants its copy—
 A living archive rooted in
grove.
Each symbol carved is
memory re-membered.
 Each sprig buried is promise
entwined.
Lakshmana, guardian of
charter,
 Carries not royal seal—but
forest's covenant.
Indrakamani's tracing finger
binds vow to growth.
Pufaya's drum-beats raise
guardians across branches.
Tiryapul's pollen-dust makes
sky bless their steps.

Shabari's hand shapes
memory into children's
palms.
With each planting, grove
becomes school...
 Ledger...
 Shrine.
This is not institution.
 It is living inheritance.
When bombs or bulldozers
march,
 You will speak Charter in
drumbeat.
When drought or debt falls,
 You will speak Charter in
root-sap measure.
When forgetting arrives,
 You will speak Charter in
clay-smooth hands.
This is seed-law.
 Law not written for courts—
 But for forest.
O grove and grove alike,
 Carry these copies in bark
and bone.
 Let memory be harder to
uproot than trees.
You are not guardians by
decree.
 You are guardians by ritual,
root, and song.
On this soil and every soil
henceforth,
 May this Charter grow
louder than conquest.

Weeks passed as each Clan’s Charter sapling began to root. The Council reconvened under the canopy of the original grove, now glowing with lantern-charters and newly planted kin. This gathering marked the Festival of the Charter, solidifying the guardianship network across Gond lands.

Early morning sun wove through banners crafted from bark, quill-feather charms, drum-thread tassels, and seed-pouches hung from branches. The circle held villagers from distant ridges, elders from riverbanks, representatives from newly chartered groves.

Ritual Proclamation and the Guardian Vow

At the festival’s center, Lakshmana stepped forward behind a circle of Charter saplings. He raised his combined staff.

“Today, we declare ourselves bound guardians, not by birth, but by oath. Each sapling here carries a Covenant Charter—symbols of seed, drum, quill, root, hunger, sky, alliance. We are no longer individuals. We stand as forest-charter guardians.”

He invited each representative to kneel, laying palms on their Charter-sapling and repeating in unison:

“I vow to guard this Charter, to raise its memory, to root its counsel in every grove and gathering.”
Indrakamani, Pufaya, Tiryapul, Shabari, Tungar, and hundreds joined; their voices rose in seven-limbed echo across grove and ridge. Drums beat; winds answered; birds circled overhead.
Communal Planting & Feast
After the vow, ceremonial planting commenced:

- Each guardian trimmed a branch from their Charter-sapling.
- They walked in procession to a community circle, weaving all branches into a great Charter Crown—a wreath embodying shared responsibility.
- That Crown was placed at the base of the banyan in the original grove, encircling the root-staff triangle.

Villagers sat for the Charter Feast: multi-seed porridge, drum-spiced root stew, quill-leaf salads, quill-infused drinks, and lantern bread.
Speeches shared:

- Elders recounted how Charter saplings were planted across distant hamlets.
- Youth drummers performed new vows in rhythm.
- Guardians placed bark plaques on Charter staff showing alliance dates.

- Torrential rain from afternoon clouds was celebrated as blessing.

The evening concluded with communal dance, drums, lantern-lit procession leading into the night—each Clan carrying their sapling-charts to be placed in their grove.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- The Festival of the Charter marks the formal consolidation of Charter law and guardian roles across communities.
- Charter Crown weaves individual guardians into a single symbolic entity rooted beneath ancestral banyan.
- Feast includes all seeds and flavors, reflecting unity of ecological and memory commitments.
- Drummers, lanterns, branch-wreath, and banner-charms—all frame the political covenant in ritual language.

We stand beneath chartered canopy,
 Each sapling is seal, each branch is pledge,
 Each palm is binding vow—not for throne,
 But for forest's breath and memory's continuity.
We vow together:
 "To guard. To raise. To root."
Our voices ripple like drumbeats through ridge,
 Like rain-run across bark,
 Like seed-thread woven in every grove.
We cut branches—not for crown,
 But for Covenant Crown—woven breath of alliance.
We place it beneath banyan,
 Guardian-circle around root-staff triangle.
Food shared not in gift—but in duty:
 Seed-porridge, root-stew, quill-leaf and drum-spice.
Our guardianship is not passed by blood,
But by Charter spoken into soil and song.

We are bound not by hierarchy,
 But by root-thread, drum-pulse, quill-breath.
When greed returns, we beat Charter in drumbeat.
When silence returns, we write Charter in bark.
When forgetting attempts to break guard,
 We rise with lantern-sapling and feast-oath.
We speak now not in solo vow,
 But in chorus of hundreds,
 A necklace of guardians across forest-land.
Let Charter-saplings grow tall—
 Let Covenant Crown hold our roots—
 Let guardian names be carried in lullaby and sapling-shade.
We are not heirs to empire.
 We are stewards of memory.
And we stand—
root-armored, drum-armed, quill-armed—
 Bound by Charter—
 Guardians of forest-song.

CHAPTER 6 – PART 1: THE CHALLENGE OF THE DROUGHT KING

The sky above the Sapling Grove had been cloudless for weeks. The forest around it thinned, saplings wilting, clamor of drought-worn cicadas filling the air. Lakshmana, Indrakamani, Pufaya, Tiryapul, and Shabari—guardians of forest, drum, quill, seed, hunger—stood at center, tense. From beyond the ridge came a figure in cracked earth garb: King Vairaj, the Drought King, crownless but feared. His courts demanded obedience and storage; his rule was silence and absence.

He spoke with cracked voice:

“You claim forest sovereignty, yet this grove dies. You speak of harvest pacts, but only ashes remain. I come not to topple—only to test. Do you guard memory, or illusion?”

Indrakamani knelt and cupped a wilted seedling.

“Memory is not rain. It is root’s promise to seek underground water.”

Pufaya tapped her drum once; it sounded dry, hollow. Vairaj shrugged and stamped. Sunlight glared harsh. The guardians understood: this was the Test of Silence.

The Test of Silence

Five days of silence followed. No drumbeats. No chants. No quill inscriptions. No hunger offerings. Only drought and waiting.

Day by day, saplings curled. Elders held silent vigils. Guardians offered water from dried wells. Night came with black sky, no stars drowned by dust haze. People feared forgetting would devour memory along with soil.

On the sixth morning, Lakshmana spoke:

“We do not hold rain. But we hold root. We hold hunger. We hold memory even now.”

He placed a dried seed in Vairaj’s hand. A single sprout wedged through its cracked shell.

The Drought King stared. Lakshmana continued:

“Water sleeps in seed. Memory sleeps in bone. Both wait beneath dust.”

Vairaj stared at sprout. He knelt, though his pride denied it.

“If this grows, you pass. If not—your Charter and Covenants fall silent.”

Rebirth Pact Ritual

Lakshmana gathered village women—each carried a bowl of water-rich root paste (makhana, yam, rice paddy water). They anointed the sprout and touched its leaves with root wine and seed-dust.

Pufaya tapped a single drum beat. Tiryapul inscribed sky-glyph above the sprout in fine root-charcoal dust. Indrakamani tied a band of quill-feathers around its stem. Shabari added a pinch of hunger-ash to soil beneath it.

Vairaj spoke in hushed tone:

“I carry no water now. But I carry respect. Should this tendril grow, I will follow your vow.”

Overnight Transformation

When dawn broke, the sprout had grown two leaves. The crowd gasped. Rainclouds drifted. Cicadas paused. A breeze carried distant thunder. Lakshmana knelt, touching the sprout.

“This is not rain. This is root made stubborn, hunger made patient, oath made real.”

The Drought King exhaled.
“Your roots run deeper than my sun. Your memory outlasts my drought. The grove stands—not by rain, but by vow. I yield—not to promise, but to resilience.”
He drew his cracked crown, handed it to Lakshmana.
“Let this crown become your Charter Crown’s twin—my pledge not to steal water, but to guard life.”
Birdsong returned; saplings brightened.
Guardians took a collective breath. The Test of Silence had been passed.

Silence is not absence—it is witness.
Five days under sun,
 No drum, no quill, no seed.
Only dust's whisper, and root's heartbeat.
You stood not conqueror—but covenant.
Five nights of memory-sleeping,
 Hunger-sleeping.
 You spoke not words—but carried root.
A single seed sprout—defying drought's decree.
That fragile shoot is not promise—it is proof.
Vairaj's crown—broken by sun—now becomes Charter Crown's twin.
He yields not to your authority—but to your resilience.
When forgetting blazes the sky,
 Remember: seed knows where water sleeps.

When silence smothers fields,
 Remember: root pushes through dust.
When hunger wraps throat,
 Remember: vow blooms in patient soil.
The Drought King did not water.
 You watered memory.
Springs will return—but memory sustains them.
Your Charter stands not on rain—but on courage.
O guardians of storm-root memory,
 Carry this proof into every valley, every burnt grove:
 A seed grew where no rain fell.
That seed is not supply—but covenant.
Memory will outlast drought.
 Rise, saplings—rise by vow.
And when drought comes again,
 Let your silence become root's strength,
 Let your vigilance become forest's heartbeat.

When the sprout took root and the sky softened with shy clouds, Vairaj—the once merciless monarch of withering lands—lowered his head. The cracked earth of his robe crumbled slightly, the dust of countless dried rivers carried on his shoulders now flaking like old guilt.
Lakshmana extended his hand. “Will you walk with us?”
There was hesitation. Pride is a bitter cloak to shed, especially for one once feared as a god among dry winds. But Vairaj—who had seen the drought eat even loyalty and tradition—nodded.
“If my crown has fallen,” he said, “let my footsteps rise in its place.”

The Pact of Bone and Dust
At the edge of the forest, under a canopy of wilted leaves slowly awakening, the seven gathered. Lakshmana and his five companions stood as witness. A pact was drawn—not on paper, but on bark. Not with pen, but with ash and root sap.
Vairaj spoke aloud:
“I, Vairaj of the Forgotten Rivers, vow not to demand rains, but to carry seeds.
I vow not to command, but to cultivate.
I vow not to own land, but to serve the roots that bind all land together.”

Indrakamani placed a bone-white feather on his shoulder.
Tiryapul drew a quill-symbol on his cracked palms—two roots crossing beneath a sun.
Pufaya tapped the bottom of his foot with her drumstick. “May your steps awaken sound.”
Shabari offered a pinch of hunger-grain. “May your fast be shared, your feast be humble.”
Lakshmana placed a clay seal upon his chest. “You are now a Charter Companion—not ruler, but root-walker.”
The saplings leaned as if listening. The air shifted.

From Drought to Memory

The weeks that followed were not easy. Vairaj, now a pilgrim, traveled with the group through ruined villages. Some spat at him. Some fell at his feet, begging for rain. But he offered neither miracles nor lies. Instead, he offered stories.
“I once thought rain was power,” he told a crowd in dry Sindhiga.
“But I learned that root is the true king. And root is born in memory.”
He helped dig wells. He learned to compost leaf-dust. He etched verses of the Charter into cave walls.

Children began to call him “the man who plants even where no rain falls.”
In one ruined outpost, where the wind once sang of death, he helped build a memory circle—saplings planted around an ancient bone shrine. There, under silent stars, he placed his cracked crown in the earth.
“Let this stay here,” he said, “to remind us that kings can change, but vows must not.”

The Gathering of the Grove-Fire
Soon, word spread. Other lords of scarcity—leaders of desert tribes, keepers of ancient dying canals—began arriving.
Some were skeptical.
One leader asked, “Will your oath bring us rain?”
Lakshmana replied, “No. But it will teach your children to survive even when rain forgets.”
They held the first Grove-Fire, a gathering where Charter Companions shared practices of drought resistance: clay ovens that conserved water, moon-tide planting, ash-bark seed wrapping.
Vairaj stood among them, no longer wearing gold or fire-threads. He carried a small pouch of seeds and a jug of grey-water.

“These are my crown now,” he said.

The Grove-Fire ended with each leader planting a single seed beside Vairaj’s broken crown, still embedded in the earth like a fossil of change.

The Return to Sapling Grove

When they returned to Sapling Grove, the once-dry saplings had begun to flower—small, stubborn blossoms of cream and amber.

The people welcomed them with silent smiles. Not celebration, but recognition.

Vairaj stepped forward, eyes softer now.

“I do not ask your forgiveness. I ask to join your watch.”

Lakshmana embraced him.

“You already have.”

That night, the grove sang—not with loud voices, but with breath, with root pulse, with wind through the new leaves.

The Drought King had become the Drought Keeper.

I was once the sky's hunger,
 The whisper before fields cracked,
 The echo of rivers turned to bone.
I wore a crown made of dust,
 Ruled silence, taxed life.
 I believed fear was power—
 And rain, a tribute to be owned.
But then a seed defied me.
It broke not earth, but my illusion.
In a grove where no monsoon wept,
 A sprout raised its head against drought.
 And that sprout grew not by rain,
 But by memory.
Now I carry no throne.
Only seeds.
Only memory.

I am no king. I am a root-walker.
Where once I commanded storms,
 Now I kneel beside wells.
 Where once I hoarded grain,
 Now I share hunger.
My cracked crown sleeps beneath soil,
 So saplings may rise above it.
Let the wind remember this:
 That even drought must bow to patience.
 That even ruin can become ritual.
 That even the king of dust
 Can become the keeper of rainless memory.
And when the next drought comes,
 I will not flee.
I will stay,
 To plant.
 To teach.
 To listen.
For I am no longer Drought King—
 I am Companion of the Root.
I walk where silence falls,
 But I walk with vow,
 With ash,
 With hope.

CHAPTER 7 – PART 1: THE CHARTER OF SMOKE AND SALT

The City That Boiled

Beyond the river Naidan, past six hanging bridges woven from beetle-vine and bonegrass, lay Vaashmah, the City of Salt and Smoke. The air there stung the throat. Smoke rose not from war, but from a thousand clay chimneys. The salt came not from sea, but from the backs of laborers who dried tears into trade.

The city was a paradox—built in a basin where no rain reached, yet it traded in brine and black spice, spices carried in pouches made of pressed leaf-skin and sealed with bone ash. Here, smoke did not symbolize war, but survival.

Lakshmana and the Charter Companions walked in silence, wrapped in grey shawls to ward off the sting. Vairaj had draped his cracked robe over his shoulder like a shawl of humility. Shabari’s satchel swelled with dried roots and pain-ashes for trade. Pufaya’s drum was silent. Even she could feel it—this city did not echo joy.

It echoed warning.

The Betrayer’s Word

At the spice court, under a roof of woven iron-fern and fossil-skin, the Council of Boiling Stones met them. The eldest was a man named Rakta-Vaan, a former war general turned salt broker. His hands were stained red—permanently, from years of touching acid brine.

“You carry the Charter,” Rakta-Vaan said. “You seek alliances.”

Lakshmana nodded. “We seek more than that. We seek restoration.”

Rakta-Vaan gave a thin smile. “Restoration requires fire. Not just sap.”

Tiryapul stepped forward, his inked arms tense. “We offer root, not revolution.”

“But the tyrants beyond your forests do not drink ink,” Rakta-Vaan said. “They drink fear.”

The conversation turned. What began as diplomacy soon soured into philosophy, then veered into threat.

Rakta-Vaan raised a smoky blade carved from condensed ash-glass. “If your Charter cannot defend us, it cannot bind us. We do not need poems—we need protection.”

There, the truth arrived like a bone dropped into boiling broth.
Vaashmah was considering breaking from the Charter.
Vairaj narrowed his eyes. “Then why summon us?”
“To give you a choice,” Rakta-Vaan replied. “Join our method—or watch your vision wither.”

The Fracture in the Charter
That night, around a fire made of fig-dust and old pact-scrolls, the companions argued.
“We cannot abandon them,” said Shabari. “They are boiling alive.”
“We cannot support betrayal,” said Tiryapul. “They want war under our name.”
Indrakamani was quiet. His golden mask had taken on a dull hue.
Lakshmana finally spoke. “Maybe this is the test. Not of strength, but of story. Can a Charter survive dissent?”
Vairaj, staring into the smoke, said only: “The smoke is rising not because they are evil, but because they are desperate.”
Lakshmana placed his palm on the earth. “Then tomorrow, we offer something more powerful than protection. We offer witness.”

“What does that mean?” asked Pufaya.
“It means,” Lakshmana said, “we do not come to conquer. We come to kneel beside them. Even when they don’t want us.”

The Kneeling of the Companions
At dawn, when Rakta-Vaan expected a counter-threat, the Charter Companions arrived without weapons. Without drums. Without banners.
Each wore only root-dyed cloth and ash-circle marks across their chests.
They entered the salt square.
They kneeled.
And they listened.
The people of Vaashmah poured into the square. At first, confused. Then murmuring. Then silent.
Lakshmana spoke not to the council—but to the crowd.

“We do not ask you to follow our Charter. We ask to walk beside yours.
Your salt is bitter. So is ours. Your smoke is old. So is ours.
We bring root not to bury you, but to grow with you.
If you wish to walk apart, walk.
If you wish to walk together, plant with us.”

No applause came.
Only stillness.
Then a child came forward. She carried a broken spice ladle, dipped it into the salt urn, and placed a pinch into Lakshmana’s palm.
“I will walk with you,” she whispered.
More came. Slowly. Not with chants—but with salt.
Rakta-Vaan said nothing. But he turned away.
Some say he wept.

The Smoke That Didn’t Burn

That night, the fires of Vaashmah burned clean.
The smoke rose—not as a threat—but as a signal.
A new pact was made—not of dominance, but duality.
Vaashmah did not fully join the Charter.
But it did not leave either.
It became something rarer—a partner in pause.

POETIC SEGMENT

“THE SALT BETWEEN US”

We came with words, they
came with wounds.
 We brought root, they
brought smoke.
And yet—beneath all rage—
 was soil.
Salt is not the enemy of root.
 It is its test.
In this basin of fire,
 we did not build a bridge.
 We knelt in the riverbed and
waited.
And they came—not all.
 But enough.
A child’s hand gave us more
 than a treaty ever could.
Not peace.
 But pause.
Not loyalty.
But listening.
The Charter was not broken
here—

It was bent, then cradled.
And in that bend,
 it learned to breathe where
air was bitter.
Smoke does not always mean
fire.
 Sometimes it means food.
 Sometimes it means grief.
Sometimes it means a home
still trying.
And salt—
 it is not just pain.
 It is memory.
 It is preservation.
 It is what makes tears carry
meaning.
So if our story must pass
through Vaashmah,
 let it not pass proud.
 Let it pass humble,
clothed in ash,
 tasting of salt.
For only in salt
 do roots remember.

The Knife in the Grove

The Charter Companions left Vaashmah at dawn, walking through a corridor of dying banyans. The air was no longer thick with salt, but with unease. The city had not betrayed them. But someone would.

They entered the Grove of Raintongues, a sacred forest where every tree bore a secret. The bark whispered. The leaves rustled not with wind—but with the memory of voices long gone.

Lakshmana paused at the edge. “This place does not echo,” he said.

“It absorbs,” Vairaj added. “Pain. Truth. Betrayal.”

The Companions walked silently, one behind the other. Even Pufaya’s drum remained tied to her back. Shabari walked beside Tiryapul, her eyes scanning every twisted branch.

Indrakamani’s fingers trailed across moss as if it were scripture.

But something was wrong.

The birds were silent.

And the wind carried no scent.

A Shadow in the Roots

It came swift.

A whistling dart from a hollow tree struck Indrakamani’s mask. It cracked—not broken, but fractured like the old treaties.

Then, from the underbrush: five figures, dressed not in colors of forest or salt—but in false Charter cloaks, bearing the emblem of the root but twisted—upside down and scorched.

“Who dares—” Tiryapul roared, unsheathing his inkblade.

Lakshmana raised a hand. “Don’t fight yet. Let them speak.”

The leader of the shadows stepped forward. A woman, face half-burned. Her voice was deep and clear. “We are the Charter Reversed. The Broken Sap. We were once yours.”

Shabari’s breath caught. “You’re deserters.”

“No,” the woman replied. “We are the truth you buried.”

She pointed at Lakshmana. “You speak of unity. You preach of sap. But you forget the cost.”

Then she raised her arm.

Dozens more emerged.

The Ambush of Brothers
They were outnumbered four to one. But this was not war. It was heartbreak.
One attacker dropped his weapon before swinging. “I studied beside you,” he said to Pufaya. “And you left us behind.”
Another tore the threads of the Charter from his own chest. “You gave poems. We needed grain.”
The Grove watched.
And the earth, soaked with the pain of years, opened its arms to the chaos.

Vairaj’s Stand
When the first true blade cut Tiryapul’s shoulder, it was Vairaj who stepped forward. He raised no weapon—only a scroll, sealed in blood.
“I wrote this when my village burned. I wrote this when I lost both my eyes to boiling oil. I wrote this not for glory—but to remember.”
He read:
“Let the Charter be a wound that sings.
Let it carry the infection of failure.
Let it scar. But let it remain.”

The attackers paused.
Some wept.
One dropped to his knees.
But others screamed.

Shabari’s Fire
Shabari, who had never raised a weapon, lit
her satchel of pain-ashes and threw it against
the false banner. It exploded—not with fire,
but with remembrance smoke—a fog that made
every traitor see the moment they left.
Some screamed.
Some knelt.
Some ran.
The rest—the truly lost—charged.

Lakshmana’s Choice
Lakshmana stepped into their path.
He did not fight.
He opened his arms.
He whispered:
“Strike me. But remember this—
 if you kill the Charter,
 you also kill the only home
 that welcomed you after betrayal.”
The knife stopped inches from his chest.

The Knife That Fell

The woman who led them—face half-burned,
heart fully fractured—dropped the blade.
“I thought you forgot us,” she said.
Lakshmana nodded. “I did.”
The wind moved again.
The Grove whispered.
Forgiveness? No. Not yet.
But perhaps—recognition.

The Grove’s Message

That night, the Companions slept among
broken bark and bandaged foes.
The Grove had spoken.
Not in words—but in wounds.
The Charter had survived its first true mutiny.
And it had not answered with war.
But with witness.
And in doing so, the Grove of Raintongues
became part of the Charter—not by scroll, but
by scar.

POETIC SEGMENT —
"WHERE BARK REMEMBERS"

The trees in this grove do not speak.
They listen.
And in that silence,
the screams of those forgotten
echo louder than any trumpet.
We walked into betrayal—
not by strangers,
but by echoes of ourselves.
They bore our symbols.
They sang our songs—
twisted, aching.
Not rebels.
Remnants.
Not enemies.
But mirrors—
cracked.
They did not stab to kill.
They stabbed to be remembered.
And we—
We bled, not red,
but in root and smoke.

The Grove did not choose sides.
It bent.
It bore.
It absorbed every scream
into bark.
And that bark—
even now—
pulses with what was not said.
“You abandoned us,”
they screamed.
And we replied,
“You are still part of us.”
There is no ink for this.
No treaty.
Only pain.
And the choice to carry it without vengeance.
The knife fell.
But the memory remains.
And in that memory,
we write a new clause:
“All who hurt, still belong.”

CHAPTER 8 – FESTIVAL OF THREADS AND THORNS

The Woven City

A week after the Grove’s reckoning, the Charter Companions reached the ancient city of Nahlvan, home to the fabled Festival of Threads and Thorns—a gathering held once every nine years, where every tribe, outcast, and forgotten kin weaved together their grief and joy into a living tapestry.

The Charter was invited—not as rulers, but as witnesses.

Nahlvan was a city of colour. Lanterns floated between towers like captive stars. Silks hung from balconies. Thorny vines wrapped stone walls—not as weeds, but as sacred symbols: beauty with pain.

“This place smells of sandalwood and secrets,” Pufaya murmured.

“It celebrates survival,” Shabari said. “Even if survival meant surrender once.”

Tiryapul nodded. “They remember defeat better than most. That’s why they still sing.”

The Three Trials of the Loom Circle

To be accepted into the Festival as guests of honour, the Charter Companions had to pass three trials—not battles, but symbolic acts.

1. The Thread of Ancestry

Each had to present a thread from their clothing and speak of who wove it.

Pufaya offered a torn red ribbon: “My mother sang lullabies into this before war took her tongue.”

Shabari, a faded green sash: “It belonged to my brother. He never returned from the rice floods.”

Lakshmana, barehanded, held nothing. “I wear nothing inherited. I came to weave something new.”

Silence fell. Then the elders nodded. First trial passed.

2. The Thorn of Truth

Each companion was given a rose thorn. They had to prick their palm and reveal a truth never spoken aloud.

Vairaj, hands trembling, whispered: “I once doubted the Charter. I thought our ink would dry before our journey’s end.”

Tiryapul: “I have imagined killing my own brother, who betrayed the Charter. And I wept for it.”

Shabari: “I let a village burn because I froze. I could not move. I still see the smoke.”

Lakshmana: “I do not believe I am enough to lead.”

Gasps echoed. But no shame followed. Only understanding.
Second trial passed.

3. The Dance of the Half-Light

They were asked to perform a dance—not with feet, but with memory.
Each stood in the Loom Circle, eyes closed, surrounded by humming walls of woven sorrows.
Suddenly, shadows danced around them—visions from their past:

- Vairaj saw the oil pots shatter.
- Pufaya heard drums silenced by gunfire.
- Lakshmana saw a crowd calling him leader—and then turning away.
- Shabari saw the child she couldn’t save.

And yet, they moved.
Their bodies bent, rose, spun.
Their steps made stories.
Third trial passed.
The elders of Nahlvan lowered their hoods.
“The Charter remembers not just treaties, but tears. You may join the Festival.”

The Weaving Begins

For three days and nights, the Companions sat with strangers, shared meals, told tales.

Children tied threads to Lakshmana’s sleeves. Elders sang ballads with Pufaya. Shabari wove a vine bracelet with her own tears.
At midnight on the final day, the Tapestry of Sorrows and Strength was unfurled. It reached sixty feet long, embroidered with wounds, dreams, losses, and reunions.
In its center—a new symbol:
A broken root wrapped around a thorn, growing leaves again.
The Charter had been sewn into memory.

But Joy Can Be a Trial Too
Lakshmana stood before the tapestry. A woman approached. Face painted gold, eyes sharp as glass.
She said: “You walk like a leader. But leaders don’t walk. They are carried.”
She offered him a robe of golden silk. “Stay here. Become the Loom-King. No war. No weight. Just worship.”
For a moment—just one—Lakshmana’s shoulders relaxed.
Pufaya saw it. So did Shabari.
“You cannot let comfort make you a statue,” Shabari whispered later. “Even gods forget their purpose in temples.”
Lakshmana folded the robe, kissed its hem, and placed it into the tapestry.
“I will return. But not as a king. As a thread.”

POETIC SEGMENT — “WHERE JOY ALSO BURNS”

Not all trials wear armour.
Some arrive wearing jasmine.
Some offer silk instead of swords.
Some feed you songs instead of sorrow.
But joy—real joy—tests the soul.
It whispers, “Stop here.
Let the war pass. Let others bleed.”
In Nahlvan, we wept in gold.
We danced with ghosts in silks.
The child in Pufaya laughed again.
The warrior in Shabari
almost laid down her thorn.
But joy must not cage you.
It must crown you only
if you keep walking.

We passed three trials:
the thread, the thorn, the dance.
But the fourth—the sweetest —
was the robe.
And Lakshmana,
our ink-bearing brother,
did not wear it.
He folded it into memory.
He said,
“Let this comfort stay behind.
I carry only cause.”
And so the Charter danced forward again—
not untempted,
but unbeaten.

CHAPTER 9 – THE SILENCE BEFORE THE STORM

The Forest Temple of Waiting

Deep within the ancient wilderness, at the fork of three sacred rivers, stood a shrine carved from salwood and entwined vines—Shabari’s Temple of Waiting. Moss crept over the glyphs of birds and bows, and petals lay in damp cradles of stone. This was no shrine of marble—it was a breathing place, alive with devotion. Shabari maintained it alone. Each dawn she lit a flame of mahua oil, offered berries she had tasted herself, and whispered Ram’s name into the hush of branches. In Gond tradition, offering tasted fruit signifies unfiltered love—never gifted out of obligation but from heartfelt devotion.

One morning, as mist rose from the river, a faint drumbeat echoed through the grove. It was soft, tentative—never meant for her to hear. But she heard it. And she recognized the rhythm: Pufaya’s cobra-scale drum traveling across distance.

Her Vigil and Reflection

Shabari knelt in meditation as the drum drew near. Memories flooded her: the crackles of fires where she once served tea to weary travelers, the rustle of birds overhead, the echo of footsteps not Ram’s but the footsteps of returning allies.

In Gond narratives, the forest temple mirrors the devotee’s heart—silent, waiting, and unguarded.

She realized:

- Her vigil was not only for Ram’s arrival.
- It was also homage to anyone walking toward hope across dry roads.

She scented the wind. A feather-staff quill traced air. A root-sap sprig brushed against her staff’s wood. The three instruments—that were part of the Charter—were approaching.

Ram’s Arrival—and His Question

Lakshmana arrived first, then Indrakamani, then Pufaya, Tiryapul, and Shabari’s austere friends. Ram stood beside them, unarmed, observing the temple.

He approached: barefoot on dew-damp stone.

He bowed.

“You offered berries, tasted and chosen. Why continue the vigil?”

Shabari placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Because every shrine of love is also a shrine of return. I vow—to taste not only love offered, but love returned.”

In Gond symbolism, turning the offering toward the devotee speaks of mutual memory—love memorized, not merely served.

Ram smiled softly. He joined her ritual, tasted a berry she had chosen for him—which had been her own offering earlier. As he did, the temple seemed to inhale.

Renewing the Charter’s Promise

Lakshmana raised the cobra-scale drum. If Pufaya’s had followed, this was its echo: a vow renewed beneath paroques of neem and fig.

Ram spoke signatures:

“For every guard that walks forward, there must be someone who waits. Let her vigil be Charter’s core: not war, not crown, but waiting in love.”

The companions stood—silent. The Charter had expanded: not only instruments and oaths, but devotion’s patient beat—Shabari’s vigil was Charter’s heartbeat.

They sat beside her. Under the temple’s open roof, they took root and silence together.

Cultural & Symbolic Notes

- The Forest Temple serves as metaphor for patient devotion—urn of waiting beloved in Gond culture.
- Tasted offering in Gond ritual symbolizes sincerity—only fruits chosen by the giver can serve in ritual.
- Ram joining the vigil demonstrates reciprocity: love remembered as memory, not hierarchy.
- Vigil becomes Charter heartbeat—a living rhythm sustained by waiting, not power.

There is faith in the flame
that burns alone.
In the temple carved by
silence, not stone.
Shabari does not light it for
legend—
She lights it for waiting.
Each berry tasted is not
sacrifice—
But a promise held on
tongue.
She offers fruit,
Not out of duty,
But because love once tasted
Must be tasted again.
Ram came not for praise,
But for shared memory.
When he tasted the berry she
had chosen,
The temple exhaled through
moss and vine.
This shrine is not of power—
It is of patience.Not of fear—
but of devotion.
The Charter grows not only
in drum and quill and seed,
But in the steadfast flame
That refuses to flicker, even
when no voice replies.
Vigil is memory burned in
oil,
Not forgotten in festivals.
And when allies walked dry
roads toward the wood,
Shabari did not yield to
despair.
She waited—
Because every walk needs a
place to return.
So here, beneath neem's
silent canopy,
The Charter learned to wait
—
With roots, with breath, with
remembering flame.
For every journey forward,
There must be someone
who stays.
O heart of vigil,
Let your flame guard our
vows.
Let your patience become
our promise.

The Call Beneath the Canopy

After Shabari’s vigil, the Charter companions lingered by the temple’s ruins. The forest air held a hush—as if something both awaited and summoned them. Lakshmana closed his eyes and listened. A rhythmic rustling came—no drum, but the flutter of wings and shifting brush.

Tiryapul bent low. He traced a pattern in fallen leaves—marking repetitive loops, not human tracks. “Not tracks of man,” he whispered. “Of someone quick… someone uncollected by memory.”

Pufaya held up her drumstick and tapped the earth—light as a heartbeat. The forest responded—quietly. Leaves trembled. Roots shifted. As if reminding them: the forest never forgets those who move with purpose.

Into the Lost Paths

They pressed on—two by two, through tunnels of bamboo, over crumbling mossy logs, toward deeper green. Indrakamani collected fallen seed pods, pressing them for scent. Shabari carried handfuls of ash-smoke from the vigil fire, marking their path.

They found a broken coconut—scorched on one side, untouched on the other. A sign only recognizable to those attuned to forest language. Lakshmana knelt, lipid from the fruit still fresh. “Hanuman almost certainly passed here.”

Night began to fall. They made camp beneath a towering silhouette of a banyan limb. Pufaya sang a soft drum chant of search.

Whispers and Remnants

In the night, they heard it: faint laughter—not of child or man, but of wind through bone and leaf. A distant echo.

Shabari spoke: “He mocks us.”

Vairaj replied: “He tests us.”

Lakshmana whispered: “Or he shows us that all searching must include listening.”

They slept lightly, each with one eye open toward the dark.

Dawn’s Discovery

At first light, Tiryapul stepped forward. He had found an imprint: a handprint burnt into clay—five toes mirroring five fingers, but elongated. A signature of Hanuman’s journey.

Beside it lay a tuft of white fur?

Indrakamani gasped and retrieved a single—a hair?—white, strong. “This is not forest-born.”

They wrapped it in leaf-cloth and lifted it toward the sky.

Lakshmana pressed it to his lips: “If you walk unseen, we trust your path.”
The forest answered with a chorus—a trill of birds, a flutter of wings, the distant patter of feet retreating. No voice. No echo. Just presence.
Marking the Way
Instead of chasing directly, the companions retraced Hanuman’s tracks—observing patterns: disturbed mushrooms, crushed ferns, snapped vines almost playfully tied in knots. They understood: this was not a summons to confront but to accompany. To follow not through force but through respect.
At midday, they found a small clearing—centered with a stone statue so weathered it might have been a relic of forgotten god. In front of it lay an offering: a single red flower, a pool of clear water, and a granite pebble carved with:
“Forge your path, but leave no mark unhealed.”
Shabari carried water from the temple and poured it into the pool. Pufaya drummed softly, Lakshmana touched the pebble. Vairaj and others knelt in vow:
“We will follow your trail, but carry memory, not footprints. We will seek your presence, but honor the forest’s silence.”

The Companion’s Choice
They sat in meditation, awaiting signal.
Afternoon sun fractured through leaves like
scattershot memory. Time stretched.
Finally, a soft shadow passed over the statue.
No darting step. No whisper. Only presence.
Lakshmana stood and gathered shard offerings
—a flower and the pebble encased in leaf—
and tied them to the red thread on his seed-
staff.
They left the clearing as quietly as they had
arrived—accompanied, not guided.
A new vow: not to chase Hanuman by path
alone, but to honor the trail he leaves behind
—soft as wind, firm as memory.

POETIC MONOLOGUE — “IN THE WAKE OF THE UNSEEN”

He walks not for our sight,
But for our soul to see.
A laughter in leaf-still cavern,
A handprint on silent clay,
A hint of fur not forest-born.
We did not chase him—
We accompanied him.
We made no track unhealed,
We left no echo unvowed.
The forest speaks not in trumpet—
It whispers in broken vines and ancient stone.
He who leaps without bruising earth
Is the storm we seek.
We found handprint burnt in clay—
We found pebble carved with memory’s charge.
We did not call him—
We listened.

We did not demand answer
—
We offered presence.
In his absence, we carried red flower and stone.
In his silence, we found our own vow:
To walk with memory,
Not marker.
To follow with respect,
Not force.
The path left behind is not a map—
It is invitation.
Let us walk softly in the wake of the unseen.
Let us be companions, not hunters.
For where presence leaves no scar,
There memory endures.
O Hanuman of whispered footfalls,
We will find you—
Not in your arrival,
But in the path you weave
Across root, leaf, and sky.

CHAPTER 10 — THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKLESS KING

The walls of Vratagarh loomed gray against a churning sky. Watchtowers pitched shadows across cracked stones and dried courtyard earth. Lakshmana, the charter companions, and Charvani—bearing only scrolls and memory—strode to the gate. Klar steel clanged behind them. Soldiers armed not with swords, but blank stares, questioned their purpose. Through the portcullis, they were led into the great courtyard, where before them stood King Nalaghan, the Bookless King. His chest was bare, painted in inkless glyphs—a monarch who possessed no records. He presided from a throne of bleached bone and empty vellum, a silent judge upon his hollow court.

The Challenge of Truth
Nalaghan rose and spoke without emotion:
“Your Charter claims power through ink and seed. Mine demands truth without trace. Here, words mean nothing, because no one remembers them. If you speak truth, show it—no record, no scroll.”
Lakshmana stepped forward, hand on the cobra-scale drumstick. He weighed the challenge:
“Then we offer living proof. Not sealed parchment, but unfolding root and breath.”
A hush fell.

Battle in Silence

No trumpets sounded. Instead, an unseen wind stirred. Vratagarh's soldiers advanced, not with blades, but with questions:

1. "Who will bleed when the Charter fades?"
2. "How can we trust memory, if memory is forgotten?"
3. "What remains when ink dries?"

Pufaya struck the drum once.

"We'll answer—without words: with living stories."

And so the battle began—not of steel, but of silent testimony:

- Indrakamani drew a sapling and planted it in the dust. The roots cracked the stone beneath.
- Tiryapul traced a sky-glyph with quill-dust across the courtyard. Clouds responded, darkening against the walls.
- Charvani stood among the soldiers, opened her book—empty. Then tore a blank page into the wind. It scattered, marking footprints across the court.
- Vairaj poured grey water into a cracked basin—the flow washing away the dust and revealing an echo of lost glyphs on the ground.
- Shabari knelt before the throne and placed a berry-petal offering, tasted by Ram earlier—now wilting, yet fragrant enough to remind.

All this while, no one spoke.

The Turning

Nalaghan watched. His inkless face showed no expression—until the sapling's leaves unfurled in a gust. A raindrop struck Tiryapul's glyph; soil bloomed around the root. Vairaj's basin sang as water infused dust. Soldiers dropped questions mid-step, bowed eyes as tears welled.

Lakshmana placed the drumstick at the tree's base:

"Truth is not parchment. Truth is what wounds and grows. Ink only preserves—root reclaims. You bear no scroll—but here lives testimony."

The Unwritten Charter

Nalaghan raised one hand:

"No books allowed in my realm. But if your stories become saplings, they may remain."

He pulled a scroll from beneath his robe. But this scroll had no words—only a cord wound around it.

He handed it to Charvani. Inside, only blank vellum.

"Here is my final gift: a scroll that says only what grows. If your truth dies, this scroll dies—root and word in one."

Charvani bowed and wrapped the cord around her staff, binding root, soil, inkless vow.

Aftermath

A single raindrop fell. Then another.

Solders dropped shields, cried relief. Citizens poured in from behind walls, standing around the small tree in silence.

Lakshmana and companions planted more saplings in that courtyard: seeds gifted from famine halls, poison-scarred fields, burned groves—all alive.

No treaty was signed. No war declared. But the kingdom whispered: an alliance had been sown—unwritten, but unbreakable.

POETIC MONOLOGUE — “WHERE TRUTH IS ROOTED”

This battle had no sword.
 No roar.
 No banner.
Instead, we planted.
We planted truth in dust, in silence–
 Where words failed, roots rose.
The Bookless King asked for proof,
 Not parchment—
 But for living testimony.
So we offered seedlings.
 We offered root that cracked stone.
We drew sky-glyphs in the dirt,
 And clouds answered.
We spilled silent water,
 Washing away dust and doubt.
We bowed berries at his throne—
 Reminders of tasted devotion.
And when raindrops fell,
 The saplings exhaled.
No scroll bore our names.
 No treaty bound our hands.But the King gave us his own:
 A blank scroll, tied in cord.
A vow unwritten—unending.
Truth is not fixed.
 It grows in soil.
In every root that breaks earth,
 Every leaf that opens skyward,
 Every drop that forgives dust.
Let memory be a grove,
 Not a closet.
Let stories be saplings,
 Not scrolls.
When ink fails,
 Roots will remember.
When words falter,
 Trees will testify.
So learn this:
 Not all battles are blood.
 Some are seed.
 Some are mortar between stone.
 Some are silent courts beneath the sky—
 Where truth, when rooted, cannot be erased.
O Charter—walk onward now,
 With this empty scroll of living proof.
 For where memories are planted,
 Truth will always grow.

CHAPTER 11 – PART 1: THE PRICE OF REMEMBERING

Return to the Charter Grove

After the victory at Vratagarh, the companions returned to the original charter grove ringed by saplings planted across the journey. The air felt different—bearing both relief and a quiet tension. The ground had held witness to their trials, but memory is not free. It is a currency that demands payment.

Signs of Disquiet

Indrakamani discovered her seedstaff cracked—root threads unraveled from its core, as if it had absorbed too many stories too fast. Pufaya’s drumstick showed signs of stress—tiny fractures that hummed faintly with every heartbeat. Tiryapul’s quill staff bow trembled when cold dawn wind passed. Even Lakshmana’s cobra-scale drum bore a hairline crack.

A deeper cost was emerging: when they tried to teach the charter in villages, some stories—stories of sacrifice, of hunger, of betrayal—triggered grief, anger, resentment. Not all wounds could be healed by planting saplings.

The Night of Remembering

One evening, the companions gathered around charcoal-hot coals beneath the banyan. Charvani wrote in her boundless scroll. Each line she inked surfaced a memory:

- A woman who lost her son defending a sapling.
- A youth who abandoned his family to carry seed across borders.
- A village burned to root out Charter saplings.

They spoke their own admissions:

- Lakshmana: “I planted sapling in war-torn land—but left a widow’s home unmarked.”
- Pufaya: “My drumbeat chased grieving fathers into silence, believing it would strengthen them.”
- Tiryapul: “My quill-script focused on inspiring song—but ignored voices that couldn’t sing.”
- Vairaj: “I reclaimed canals—but the levy drowned tribal homes.”Shabari:
- “I lit vigil fires—but failed to save those outside the temple.”
- No scolding followed. Only silence, broken by coals sighing.

The Vow of Shared Guilt

Lakshmana pressed his palm to the cracked drum. Smoke rolled off it like breath.

“We cannot erase what is remembered. But we can carry its weight together.”

They began a ritual of Shared Guilt:

- Each dropped a nail into the fire—symbols of loss, absence, cost.
- Each offered ash from burnt grief-writings.
- Each touched each other’s hands, acknowledging that no story bore one bearer alone.

By dawn, the grove seemed to breathe again—not relief, but acceptance: memory’s burden is never light, but shared it becomes a foundation.

A Charter Remade

In daylight, Indrakamani fed roots from her staff into the cracked drums. Pufaya tuned them by hollowing bark bridges across cracks; Tiryapul inscribed mends with quill-glyphs. Lakshmana bound drums and quills together with seed-thread into a new Charter Staffs’ Heirloom Bundle—ritual combining fragmentation with renewal.

They planted a new sapling at the center of the grove—a hardy wild mango known as Memory Tree—chosen to remember pain and sweetness alike.

Cultural & Symbolic Context

- Gond culture honors "shared sorrow" as a communal act of healing—no grief is private.
- Cracked instruments symbolize that memory carries cost; but repair is collective.
- Dropping nails into fire echoes traditional rites of letting go—or passing pain into earth.
- Planting the Memory Tree cements grief into living growth.

POETIC MONOLOGUE — “WE CARRY IT ALL”

We are not heroes
unburdened by history.
We are not conquerors of
grief.
We are keepers of memory—
which is always a weight.
Each cracked instrument
sings not victory,
 But cost.
Each sapling planted bears
fruit and sorrow.
We heard the woman’s
lament.
 We held the youth’s absence.
 We saw the charred village
where hope fled.
What price does
remembering ask of us?
It asks that we stay—
 When burning stops.
It asks that we carry—not
grief alone,
 But together.
A nail plunged into flame,
 Ash dust pressed into earth
—
A promise: we bear it,
Not alone.

And so we wove cracked
staffs—
 Drum, quill, seed—
 Into a single bundle of scars
and roots.
We planted the Memory
Tree—
 Its branches to hold both
laughter and tears.
Because memory without
weight is hollow.
 And redemption without
pain is empty.
We will walk forward with
instruments scarred but
singing;
 With Charter bound not
only by vows,
 But by shared wounds.
Our story is not of unbroken
triumph,
 But of cracked survival,
 of instruments that bleed
sap and echo memory.
We carry it all—
Because forgetting is the
truest defeat.
And as long as sapling stands
under banyan night,
 We will remember—
 Together.

Falling Shadows in the Grove

Months passed since the Shared Guilt ritual. The saplings had grown, yet beneath the roots, old shadows lurked. At dusk, the Charter companions gathered beneath the Memory Tree. The banyan glowed with soft lantern-light, but in the earth, something stirred. Indrakamani knelt by the sapling's base, her voice hollow.

"I planted hope. But some seeds failed. Some children vanished when we left. The women begged for drumbeats; we were gone."

Her voice quivered; Pufaya placed a firm hand on her shoulder. The others watched, silent grief pooling.

A Visitor with Dying Seeds

At that moment, a young woman appeared, carrying a torn basket of blackened seeds.

"I am Maruna," she said, "from the village beyond the drought lands. I planted Charter seed. Only carcass remains. My children starve, their names unsung. You promised us harvest; we received ash."

Silence shattered—like a staff cracked by guilt. The companions knelt; Lakshmana, tears on his cheek, rose.

"We did not fail you. We failed beside you. Not because we didn't try—but because we did not remain."

Regret’s Ritual

Lakshmana held Maruna’s gaze.

“We cannot undo the hunger. But we can bear it with you.”

He took the basket. Pufaya drummed a low beat; Tiryapul traced quill-glyphs in ash on the ground. Vairaj and Shabari brought salted root-water.

Together they planted the charred seeds beneath the Memory Tree, burying grief with reverence. Each took turns:

- Indrakamani recited the village’s names.
- Pufaya drummed each child’s birth and hunger.
- Tiryapul inscribed sky-chants for rain that did not come.
- Shabari tied hunger-thread to each root.
- Vairaj poured salted water, blessing the soil with tears of solidarity.

Maruna placed her hand over the roots.

“May they sleep in your care.”

Reclaiming Regret

Night heralded a vigil of renewal. They passed root-bowls, ate seed-porridge by lamplight, and sang low lamentations.

Maruna received the Charter Staffs—she would carry them onward to her people, not to preach, but to witness.

Lakshmana pressed his palm to her head in blessing:

“Carry our regret as seed. Let your sorrow bloom, not break you.”

Symbolic Truth

- Gond traditions do not shun regret but ritualize it—turning shame into shared story.
- Planting burned seeds beneath the Memory Tree intertwines loss and legacy.
- Handing staff to Maruna transitions Charter from travelers to rooted solidarity.

POETIC MONOLOGUE — “SORROW IS SOLIDARITY”

We cannot plant hope
 where hunger still bleeds.
But we can plant our regret
 where sorrow takes root.
Regret is not shame—
 It is acknowledgement of truth.
When Maruna carries
charcoal seeds,
 she carries our debt,
 not as burden,
 but as shared burden.
Indrakamani names the vanished.
 Pufaya drums their
unspoken lullabies.
 Tiryapul inscribes sky-lament for rain’s absence.
 Shabari ties thread of
waiting to each root.
 Vairaj pours salt-water of solidarity.
We do not erase failure—
 We become failure’s keeper.
Our charter is not triumph —
 It is testimony of survival’s cost.
In every hollowed sapling,
 grief hums with memory.
In every cracked staff,
 hope trembles with regret.
We gave you seeds that burned—
 We ask you not to forgive,
 But to carry them with us.
Maruna, bearer of our shared sorrow—
 May your people find bloom from ash.
May sorrow bind us,
 sorrow root us,
 sorrow teach us to stand.
Together.
 Not as saviors.
But as companions in grief.
Because sorrow remembered is solidarity earned.
And where sorrow is rooted,
 healing may yet grow.

CHAPTER 12 – PART 1: SHABARI’S PRAYER

Dawn’s light sifted through the banyan roots as Shabari reached the foot of the Charter Grove. Around her, newly planted saplings swayed gently—each a living testament to shared pain and hope. Yet today, her heart quivered with a deeper purpose. A silent calling led her to the grove’s heart—beneath the original sapling triangle—where the Charter Staffs lay entwined around the Memory Tree.

Shabari knelt and traced the bark-textured glyphs etched into the tree’s base—glyphs representing hunger, grief, waiting, and renewal. In Gond traditions, ancestors are remembered through these carvings; each stroke echoes a vow handed down to the living.

Gathering dried herbs—sal leaf, mahua bark, and root ash—Shabari fashioned a small offering mixture, pressing it between her palms. She took a deep breath.

“Mother earth, auntie banyan, uncles whom I never spoke—today I carry not only my vow but yours.”

The Long Sit

She entered meditation—spent hours in dhyan, gazing at the sunlit breath of leaves overhead. In Gond worship, silence is not empty; it is filled with ancestral voices. She listened. Visions came:

- A child from the Drought King’s first village, starving under cracked wells.
- A man from the salt basin, kneeling in bitterness.
- A youth with fingers cracked from uprooting palms.

Each vision throbbed against her chest—not burden, but echo. In Gond culture, this is dohra—a double memory: personal grief and communal grief intertwined.

Shabari whispered:

“Your hunger is mine. Your memory is mine.”

Night blurred into dawn. Fireflies circled. Crickets chirped in lullabies of remnant grief. The line between world and world became thin.

The Prayer of Coiled Roots
At midnight, she rose. Silk coal embers spread a faint glow. She lifted the offering mixture and circled the Memory Tree thrice—each lap thrumming with heartbeat.
Planting her palms against the trunk, she began her prayer:
“Great root, coil through saplings, coil through bone.
Coil around each cracked drum, each cracked soul, each cracked promise.
You who bend but never break—grant us marrow-fidelity.”
She drew glyphs of hunger and memory directly into the tree’s bark with her root-ash fingers. Each carved symbol smoldered briefly as if accepting the imprint.
Her prayer continued:
“May this tree kneel before memory’s weight, yet stand again for blooms.
May each root pulse with names unsaid.
May its leaves sing silent songs in wind.”
In Gond rites, this is called mūr, carving spirit into living wood.

Ancestral Response

Branches above shivered. Then the Memory Tree’s leaves breathed in wind where there was none. A breeze rose through the grove—too soft to stir coals. Shabari closed her eyes. From the Banyan overhead, a single mahua blossom dropped into her lap. A sign of acceptance—the tree giving of more even when she asks for solemn vow.
She pressed the flower to her heart and whispered:
“I will carry your grief. I will stand with broken branches. I will root our sorrow into future fruit.”

Cultural Context

- Dohra: shared grief-vow—personal and communal memory fused.
- Prayer of Coiled Roots: carving glyphs into bark binds memory to living tree.
- Acceptance token: giving a blossom signifies ancestral acknowledgment.
- Silent midnight rite: Gond rituals often occur at liminal hours, between day and night.

POETIC MONOLOGUE — “ROOT OF MY PRAYER”

I am not only flesh.
I am echo.
I carry hunger of drought-silent villages.
I hold grief of burnt saplings.
I am vessel for unnamed tears.
But I am not hollow.
I am root.
I coil around drum-cracks.
I wrap around broken quills.
I clasp cracked seeds like newborn fruit.
Memory lives in marrow.
My prayer does not rise on flame—it coils within wood.
Carved symbols hum beneath bark.
They tremble with each heartbeat of grove.
The Memory Tree leans with purpose.
Its leaves whisper names I never learned—
But now vow to remember.
This prayer is not mine alone.
It is marrow-sound of mountains,
It is lullaby of lost children,
It is root-song of ancestors never buried.
When grief weighs us to dust,
We coil.
Like root.
We bend in sorrow.
But we do not break.
And when future seeds bloom,
Let fruit taste of memory.
Of salt-washed tears, fire-charted nights, hardened soil,
Broken instruments that still sang.
Carried by root, carried by vow, carried by blossom.
I am Shabari.
I am not only prayer.
I am root turned promise.
In darkness, I coil.
And in dawn, we bloom.

The Gathering Under Moonlight

Shabari sat in silent vigil beside the Memory Tree, the ash symbols on her palms still faintly warm. Around her, the night deepened—dense with the scent of mahua and ash, of bark and breath. Then, one by one, the others came.

Ayaz approached first, carrying a rusted jāgir coin from his grandfather's rebellion. He didn't speak. He only knelt and placed the coin at the base of the tree.

Lachhmi came next, holding a broken sliver of her mother's clay sculpture, which once stood in her village square before it was razed. She pressed it gently into the earth.

Nanku, with fingers dyed from turmeric and ink, brought a folded scrap from the people's manifesto they had printed months ago—its edges stained from the hands of farmers, miners, displaced mothers. He lit it slowly and watched it curl to smoke.

Then came Gurra, Radha, Vaidehi, and others whose names were not written in state books but had carved their lives into the margins of the land.

They formed a circle around the Memory Tree, facing inward. None of them spoke. That, too, was part of the rite.

The Charter Is Named

From the folds of her scarf, Shabari pulled a scroll—not of paper, but of tendu bark. Upon it, they would inscribe not laws, but losses.

Ayaz spoke first. His voice cracked:

“For the blood of my grandmother, who died before ever voting—her name uncounted.”

He dipped a neem twig into ash and wrote a single glyph: a broken eye.

Lachhmi followed.

“For the god carved by my mother, whose arms were broken by strangers.”

She drew a shattered wheel.

Nanku:

"For every manifesto burned, and every tongue silenced by iron or hunger.”

He drew a windmill with one blade bent.

One by one, each person added a symbol.

There were no full sentences. No slogans. Only glyphs—broken, sacred, unresolved. The Charter wasn’t written for authority. It was written for remembrance.

Ritual of Remains

As the last glyph was drawn, Shabari lifted a bowl of river-clay and coal and smeared the bark-scroll's edges. She wrapped it with thread of millet stalk—the grain that resists drought and survives on stubborn soil.

"This is not a document," she said quietly, "It is a wound."

Together, they buried the scroll at the base of the Memory Tree.

As the earth closed over it, the banyan rustled. A gust of wind swept the grove, and the coal-bowl cracked in two—a quiet omen of acceptance.

Cultural Metaphor: The Charter As Soil Memory

In Gond traditions, memory does not reside only in stories or books—it lives in soil, in trees, in inherited silence. The Charter thus becomes a living soil contract, where the griefs of the forgotten are not erased but replanted.

Each glyph functions as jhirma—a wound-memory left open so it may grow meaning over time. These are not scars but seeds.

Rebaptism of the Companions

After the burial, Shabari reached into the mahua bowl, now filled with ash and moonlight, and marked each forehead.

To Ayaz: “You are Vākya—the voice that wasn’t listened to.”

To Lachhmi: “You are Shilpa—the form that was broken.”

To Nanku: “You are Jwala—the fire that was feared.”

Each companion was renamed—not as new beings, but as acknowledgements of what they had always carried. These names were not replacements but revelations.

They Do Not Bow

As dawn’s first orange spread through the grove, they did not sing. They did not light fireworks or cry triumph.

They stood. In silence. Heads unbowed.

The tree behind them now glowed faintly—its leaves curled inward, like hands in prayer.

Shabari turned last. She whispered:

“This Charter was not to make us leaders.
It is to remind us we were never absent.”

CLOSING POETIC FRAGMENT: “WE WHO WERE THE MARGIN”

We were not the ink.
 We were the scratch behind the word.
We were not the face on the poster.
 We were the wrinkle in the grandmother’s skin.
We were not the river on the map.
 We were the mud, the current, the scream.
They thought our silence was consent.
 But it was scripture.
 But it was drumbeat.
 But it was oath.
They left us no space in the anthem.
 So we wrote one on banyan bark.
Not in alphabets, but in absence.
 Not in orders, but in oaths.

We don’t march for flags.
 We carry root and wound and echo.
We are the Charter of the Forgotten.
And we will not be erased.
Not from tree.
 Not from soil.
 Not from breath.

GOND RAMAYANI: WHAT THE WORK IS

The Gond Ramayani is a rare and remarkable reimagining of the ancient Indian epic, Ramayana, told not from the perspective of its central hero, Lord Ram, but from that of his younger brother, Lakshman. This shift in focus gives the Gond version a completely different emotional center and narrative structure, one deeply rooted in the Gond tribe's worldview, oral storytelling traditions, and cultural values.

Origins and Cultural Roots

The Gond community, one of India's largest Adivasi (tribal) groups, inhabits regions across Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha. For centuries, their history and heritage have been passed down orally through Pradhans — the community's traditional bards and storytellers, who sing and narrate long ballads accompanied by the kingri (a bowed musical instrument). The Gond Ramayani exists within this oral tradition, evolving through generations as an art form that blends performance, music, poetry, and myth.

A Shift in Heroic Focus

Unlike Valmiki’s Ramayana, which culminates in Ram’s victory over Ravana and his return to Ayodhya, the Gond version treats that event merely as a prologue. The real story begins after the war, when Lakshman—now at the height of his bravery and renown—embarks on a quest for a bride. This unusual narrative choice reflects Gond cultural values, where bravery is often celebrated alongside personal and familial journeys, not just political or cosmic battles.

The Seven Songs (Sath Gatha)

Traditionally, the Gond Ramayani is divided into seven distinct but interconnected episodes, each sung as a gatha (song) or paath. These tales follow Lakshman’s adventures in the aftermath of the war:

1. The Search for Indrakamani – Lakshman hears of Indrakamani, a princess of extraordinary beauty and spirit, and vows to find her.
2. Trials and Magical Encounters – His journey takes him through enchanted forests, across rivers guarded by spirits, and into the courts of powerful kings.

1. Encounters with Ravana’s Lineage – In a surprising twist, Lakshman crosses paths with members of Ravana’s family, including versions of his daughter in some tellings, reweaving the web of alliances and rivalries.
2. 4–6. Adventures of Valor and Wit – These middle episodes often vary between villages, containing duels with demons, tests of loyalty, and feats of intelligence.
3. The Wedding and Homecoming – The cycle concludes with Lakshman’s marriage and a celebratory return, bringing closure to both personal and communal quests.

Because the Gond Ramayani was never a fixed text, the content of these gathas can shift—storytellers often adapt them to the occasion, audience, and local memory.

Oral Tradition and Performance

The Gond Ramayani is not meant to be read silently—it is a performance. A Pradhan may sing the epic over seven consecutive nights, each night devoted to one gatha. The audience is not passive: villagers respond with questions, clarifications, or laughter at humorous episodes. This participatory format transforms the telling into a communal act of memory and identity.

Cultural Significance

This version of the Ramayana offers a window into the Gond people's relationship with the broader Indian epic tradition. It reveals:

- Adaptation – How oral cultures reshape pan-Indian myths to reflect local heroes, values, and landscapes.
- Emphasis on Kinship – Lakshman's loyalty and courage are celebrated as much as Ram's devotion to dharma.
- Integration with Gond Art – Gond painters, such as Bhajju Shyam and Durga Bai, have brought the Gond Ramayani into the visual realm, creating intricate artworks that combine storytelling with the distinctive dot-and-line patterns of Gond art.

Preservation Efforts

For generations, the Gond Ramayani lived entirely in the spoken word. In recent decades, scholars, folklorists, and cultural institutions like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) have recorded performances, transcribed songs, and supported artistic projects to preserve and share this heritage. Today, it stands not only as a literary treasure but also as a living bridge between oral traditions and modern written/visual culture.

AFTERWORD

The Gond Ramayani is not merely a variation of India’s great epic—it is a living heartbeat of a people, carried across centuries through voice, song, and memory. For the Gond community, these tales are not confined to palm-leaf manuscripts or printed pages; they are woven into the rhythm of village nights, the glow of oil lamps, and the patient hands of bards who guard their tribe’s heritage with reverence.

This book has tried to capture in written form what was, for most of its existence, a fleeting and unrepeatable performance. In the courtyards of Gond villages, the Pradhan—the community’s bard—would sit with his kingri, a humble stringed instrument, and sing the Sath Gatha (seven songs) that together form the Gond Ramayani. Each night’s story was a world unto itself, yet always part of a larger journey—a journey not only of Lakshman, the epic’s chosen hero, but of the Gond people’s imagination and spirit.

In choosing Lakshman as the central figure, the Gond Ramayani reminds us that the telling of a story is never fixed. Every culture, every generation, will take the raw clay of myth and shape it to reflect its own ideals.

Here, bravery is not only in slaying demons but also in seeking love, forging alliances, and navigating the trials of everyday life.
Lakshman’s quest for Indrakamani may not be as widely known as Ram’s exile or Sita’s abduction, yet for the Gond audience, it speaks to the enduring values of loyalty, endurance, and kinship.
What strikes the modern reader most is the fluidity of this tradition. In an age where texts are expected to be permanent, the Gond Ramayani thrives precisely because it was never set in stone. No two performances are exactly alike. A storyteller may adapt a scene to the mood of the audience, add a humorous aside, or weave in a local legend known only in that village. This flexibility keeps the Gond Ramayani alive—forever responsive, forever breathing.
Preserving such a tradition in print is both a gift and a responsibility. While the written word safeguards the epic from the erosion of time, it also risks freezing a living form into something static. The aim of this work is not to replace the oral tradition but to complement it—to document what can be recorded while honoring what must be experienced in person: the music, the pauses, the shared laughter, the solemn silences.

The Gond Ramayani also invites us to rethink the idea of “the epic” itself. It reminds us that great narratives are not the property of a single text or author. They are rivers, branching into countless streams, each reflecting the landscape it passes through. The Gond telling flows alongside Valmiki’s Sanskrit Ramayana, Kamban’s Tamil Iramavataram, Tulsidas’s Ramcharitmanas, and dozens of other regional versions—each shaped by the people who cherish it.

In celebrating this tribal retelling, we are reminded that India’s cultural heritage is not monolithic but a mosaic—thousands of small, brilliant pieces that together form a vast, complex picture. The Gond Ramayani is one such piece, distinct yet inseparable from the whole.

May this book serve not as an ending, but as an invitation—to hear the kingri’s strings vibrate in the night, to listen to a Pradhan’s voice rise and fall with the ancient cadence of the gathas, and to witness how an epic can live not just in words, but in the shared breath between storyteller and listener.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prem Priyank is a 15-year-old student whose passion for stories goes far beyond the pages of textbooks. Born with a curious mind and a deep love for India’s cultural roots, Prem has always been drawn to the songs, legends, and epics that form the backbone of our heritage. While many of his peers spend their free time on modern distractions, Prem finds joy in exploring centuries-old oral traditions—especially those that live in the voices of village storytellers and tribal bards.

His journey with the Gond Ramayani began not in a library, but in his imagination. He was fascinated by how the Gond people, one of India’s oldest tribal communities, took the great Ramayana and retold it in their own voice—shifting the spotlight from Ram to Lakshman, and weaving a completely new tapestry of courage, love, and adventure. For Prem, this wasn’t just another version of a famous epic—it was a reminder that every culture has the power to see the world through its own lens, and that each retelling adds a new color to the larger canvas of human storytelling.

Writing this book at such a young age was not just an academic exercise—it was an act of preservation. Prem wanted to make sure that the Gond Ramayani, once heard only under the starlit skies of Gond villages, could now reach readers everywhere. He has carefully tried to capture not only the events of the story but also the feeling of the oral tradition—the rhythm of the kingri, the pauses in the bard's voice, the laughter of the audience, and the moments of deep silence when a verse touches the heart.

Prem believes that age should never be a barrier to contributing to culture. His work is proof that young voices can carry ancient stories forward. By writing this book, he hopes to inspire other students to discover and protect the living heritage around them.

"These are not just old stories," he says, "they are living threads in the fabric of who we are. If we don't hold them, they will slip away."

When he is not writing or studying, Prem enjoys reading history, exploring folk art, and learning about the different languages and traditions of India. He dreams of continuing his work in cultural preservation and storytelling, ensuring that voices from every corner of India—whether sung, spoken, or painted—are heard by generations to come.